



**BOARD OF EDUCATION OF HOWARD COUNTY  
MEETING AGENDA ITEM**

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**TITLE:** Update on School Resource Officers in Schools Focus  
Groups **DATE:** October 22, 2020

**PRESENTER(S):** Kevin Gilbert, Director, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Thomas McNeal,  
Director Security, Emergency Preparedness and Response, Anissa Dennis,  
Chief School Management and Instructional Leadership Officer

**Strategic Call To Action Alignment:** Organizational culture and climate are supportive and nurturing and provide a safe and healthy environment for all students and staff.

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**OVERVIEW:**

The purpose of this Board report is to provide an update on the recently conducted focus groups on School Resource Officer (SRO) in the Howard County Public School System. The focus groups were conducted on October 5, 2020; October 13, 2020; and October 15, 2020.

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**RECOMMENDATION/FUTURE DIRECTION:**

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**SUBMITTED BY:** Kevin Gilbert  
Director, Diversity, Equity,  
and Inclusion

**APPROVAL/CONCURRENCE:** Michael J. Martirano, Ed.D.  
Superintendent

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Thomas McNeal  
Director Security,  
Emergency Preparedness  
and Response

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Karalee Turner-Little  
Deputy Superintendent

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Anissa Dennis  
Chief School Management  
and Instructional  
Leadership Officer

SROs in Schools Stakeholder Focus Group Report  
Report to the Board of Education of Howard County  
October 22, 2020

## **Introduction**

In an effort to learn about the opinions of the community on the subject of School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools within the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) and provide the board with information germane to Howard County specifically, HCPSS staff in conjunction with staff from Howard County Government held a series of focus groups with various stakeholders. The following report is submitted to provide the Board of Education of Howard County with an update on these focus groups and present some of the findings from these engagements.

## **Purpose of Focus Groups**

Before providing the data and findings of the report, it is important to highlight the purpose of the focus groups. Focus groups bring together a small group of individuals to gauge opinions, views, and thoughts on a subject. In this instance, the subject was specific to SRO presence in HCPSS schools. The purpose of these focus groups was twofold. First, they were used as a tool to engage a cross section of stakeholders on the subject. Secondly, they were convened to provide the Board with qualitative data on why people feel the way they do about SROs in HCPSS schools. The focus groups were not designed to engage in debate on the issue of SROs in HCPSS or prove that SROs should remain or be removed from HCPSS schools. Participants engaged in facilitated dialogue on the subject, and notes were taken to capture their opinions and thoughts on the subject.

## **Organization and Process of Focus Groups**

Three focus groups were conducted on October 5, October 13, and October 15 and involved students, families, HCPSS school based staff, and community stakeholders. The Focus groups were organized by staff from HCPSS and Howard County Government, and convened virtually through Zoom and Webex platforms. Individuals wanting to participate in the focus group were required to fill out an online application. Participants were randomly selected using an online random number generator. Those selected were then guided in a dialogue on SROs in HCPSS by two facilitators, and two note takers were assigned to each group to capture the information.

Because they are designed to really engage participants and allow for as much participation as possible, focus groups are meant to be small. The recommended size for focus group participants is 10-12 people<sup>1</sup>; however, since the subject of SROs in schools has generated much interest within schools and the community, organizers decided that these focus groups would be 30-40 people. To ensure that there would be a diverse and balanced variety of opinions

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<sup>1</sup> This information comes from Sage Publishing, which is a global academic publisher of books and journals. The focus group participant guide was retrieved from [https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/24056\\_Chapter4.pdf](https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/24056_Chapter4.pdf)

on the topic, the participants selected were equally divided among those who supported having SROs in schools, those who opposed having SROs in schools, and those who had no position on SROs in schools. The number of participants were determined based on the number of applicants, with an aim of keeping the numbers under 40 where possible.<sup>2</sup>

In order to divide the groups equally, applicants were required to give their position on SROs in schools. Participants were asked, but not required to give some personal information such as a race/ethnicity, gender, and pronouns. This meant that not all demographic data was captured on every applicant or participant. Another limitation of the quantitative data was the fact that an individual could submit multiple applications.<sup>3</sup> Finally, another drawback to consider in looking at the quantitative data points is that on the student and family application, the position identification was intended to be that of the student. Consequently, it is probable, particularly in the case of the middle school student applicants, that a parent or guardian could have filled out the application and captured their own position and not that of the student.

Those selected to participate in focus groups were contacted via email and given information to sign into the session online. The session consisted of two facilitators, one from the HCPSS Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and the other from the Howard County Office of Human Rights. Following a brief welcome from HCPSS Superintendent Dr. Michael J. Martirano and County Executive Dr. Calvin Ball, participants engaged in dialogue on law enforcement and SROs by answering a series of questions. As the dialogue took place, note takers listened and took notes with their cameras off and their mics muted. Although some staff from both HCPSS and Howard County Government remained in the session, Dr. Martirano and Dr. Ball both left the session after their remarks, as they did not want their presence to influence any of the discussion. All other staff who remained kept their cameras off and mics muted. In addition, during the student and family focus group, parents and guardians were placed in a separate virtual room from their students. Each session lasted an hour and a half.

## Quantitative Data Points<sup>4</sup>

The first focus group was held on October 5, 2020, and consisted of students and families located in schools that have SROs. The second focus group was held on October 13, and consisted of HCPSS staff located in schools that have SROs, and the final focus group was held on October 15, and consisted of community stakeholders within Howard County. The following tables provide the raw data points for the applications and the focus groups.

Focus Group	# of Applicants	# of Duplicate Applicants <sup>5</sup>	# of Applicants not from schools w/o SROs <sup>6</sup>	# of Applicants (actual)	# Support for having	# Oppose to having	# No Position on having SROs in HCPSS
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<sup>2</sup> The student and family focus group exceeded the 40 maximum in that there were over 200 applicants, and in order to divide the number participants equally, the group was expanded to 42.

<sup>3</sup> The feature on google form that would allow only one application submission was disabled in order to prevent applicants outside of HCPSS from having to sign into google in order to apply

<sup>4</sup> It was important that those selected to participate felt comfortable and secure enough to share so that data we gathered from them would be as authentic as possible; therefore, the names of those selected will not be used in this report.

<sup>5</sup> This number was subtracted to give actual number.

<sup>6</sup> This number was subtracted to give actual number.

					SROs in HCPSS	SROs in HCPSS	
Students and Family <sup>7</sup>	208	23	7	178	101 (56.7%)	30 (16.9%)	47 (26.4%)
HCPSS Staff	107	-	-	107	71 (66.4%)	24 (22.4%)	11 (11.2%)
Community Stakeholders	88	7	-	81	34 (42%)	21 (25.9%)	26 (32.1%)

*Student and Family Focus Group Applicants by Grade<sup>8</sup>*

Grade	Number of Applicants
6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	23 (12.9%)
7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	21 (11.8%)
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	10 (5.6%)
9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	34 (19.1%)
10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	34 (19.1%)
11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	32 (18%)
12 <sup>th</sup> Grade	24 (13.5%)
Total	178 (100%)

*HCPSS Staff Focus Group Applicants by Level<sup>9</sup>*

Level	Number of Applicants
Middle School	33 (30.8%)
High School	72 (67.3%)
Education Center	2 (1.9%)
Total	107 (100%)

*Demographic Breakdown of Applicants*

Focus Group	Total Applicants	# Applicants who identified by Race/Ethnicity	Support	Oppose	No Position
Students and Family	178	95 (53.4%)	46 (48.4%)	26 (27.4%)	23 (24.2%)
HCPSS Staff	107	65	36	18	11

<sup>7</sup> This data is different from publically reported data that was posted on social media. The number on social media was prior to removal of duplicates and applications from schools w/o SROs.

<sup>8</sup> 17 of the 24 schools with SROs had at least one student and family member applicant

<sup>9</sup> 16 of 24 schools with SROs had at least one staff member applicant

		(60.7%)	(55.4%)	(27.7%)	(16.9%)
Community Stakeholders	81	44 (54.3%)	13 (29.5%)	18 (41%)	13 (29.5%)

*Demographic Breakdown of Applicant by Position on SROs in HCPSS*

*Student and Family Focus Group Applicants Who Identified*

Position	Total Number	Asian	Black/African American	Hispanic/Latino	White	2 or More Races	Other Race/Ethnicity
Support	46	8 (17.4%)	9 (19.6%)	1 (2.2%)	23 (50%)	4 (8.7%)	1 (2.2%)
Oppose	26	6 (23.1%)	9 (34.6%)	-	7 (26.9%)	2 (7.7%)	2 (7.7%)
No Position	23	3 (13%)	16 (69.6%)	1 (4.3%)	1 (4.3%)	2 (8.7%)	-

*HCPSS Staff Focus Group Applicants Who Identified*

Position	Total Number	Asian	Black/African American	Hispanic/Latino	White	2 or More Races
Support	36	1 (2.8%)	9 (25%)	1 (2.8%)	25 (69.4%)	-
Oppose	18	-	6 (33.3%)	-	10 (55.6%)	2 (11.1%)
No Position	11	1 (9.1%)	3 (27.3%)	1 (9.1%)	6 (54.5%)	-

*Community Stakeholder Focus Group Applicants Who Identified*

Position	Total Number	Asian	Black/African American	White	2 or More Races
Support	13	-	5 (38.5%)	8 (61.5%)	-
Oppose	18	1 (5.6%)	4 (22.2%)	11 (61.1%)	2 (11.1%)
No Position	13	2 (15.4%)	7 (53.8%)	3 (23.1%)	1 (7.7%)

*Focus Group Participant Demographic Breakdown*

FG	# Selected	% of Apps.	DNI*	Asian	Black/African American	Hisp./Latino	White	2 or More Races	Other
Student and Family	42	24%	17	1	13	2	6	2	1
HCPSS Staff	30	28%	5	2	10	2	10	1	-
Community Stakeholder	36	44% <sup>10</sup>	12	3	9	-	9	3	-

\*Did Not Identify by Race/Ethnicity

<sup>10</sup> A higher percentage of the community stakeholder applications were selected to engage a more of the community at large, which has shown increased interest in SROs in HCPSS schools.

## *Summary of Focus Group Findings*

There were themes that surfaced based on the discussions around SROs in schools. One such theme centered on relationships. Of primary concern was that it appears that SROs have unequal relationships with students; there are some students who have a genuine relationship with SROs however, other students shared this is only true when similarities or similar interests are shared. Another thought on the relationship theme that rose out of the student discussion was that although SROs have the ability to form relationships, some participants felt that the SRO's job was more centered on policing of students. As it relates to relationships, some HCPSS staff, community stakeholders, and families believe that SROs help to foster positive relationships between law enforcement and young people. Those who agree with this idea also felt this relationship building was important in establishing better relationships with law enforcement outside of the school setting. It should be noted that this was not universally shared. Others felt that it should not be the responsibility of schools and young people to build healthy relationships with law enforcement.

In addition to relationships, another theme to surface was the appearance that SROs are more for the protection of staff instead of the care/protection of students and that students of color are disproportionately affected by the presence of SROs. It is important to note here that participant opinions seemed to coincide with the type of relationship or experience one had with law enforcement in general, and/or with an SRO specifically. Many of those who have had positive experiences showed a tendency to have more of a favorable view toward SROs in schools, while those who had negative experiences with SROs, tended to express concerns with SROs.

Many of the adults in the focus group talked of the importance of having SROs for school safety. This was of primary importance to parents or guardians, and school staff. Those who agreed with the safety theme pointed to SROs being a part of the emergency plans for schools, and being available to deal with emergencies so that staff would not have to worry about those situations. During the student group, several students felt that SROs seem to focus more on students of color (particularly Black male students). This also rose up during both the staff and community focus groups. Additionally, it was highlighted that foreign-born students may experience SROs differently. It was pointed out during the community stakeholder focus group that some immigrant families who may not have documentation are fearful of SROs in the building; furthermore, students of immigrant families will tell their families to not attend events or conferences out of fear of coming in contact with the SRO. Also mentioned in the session was that some of our immigrant students come from countries with very negative experiences involving law enforcement, and the presence of SROs may be triggering for those students.

Another significant theme to surface through the focus groups was that the public needs more transparency and communication from HCPD and HCPSS about the role of the SRO, more data about arrests, and what proactive actions are being taken by both to prevent issues within schools and/or the community. In terms of transparency, the community stakeholders really want specific information about the type of training that SROs receive to better inform them on SROs ability to truly build relationships with students.

Universally, all groups pointed to the importance of school leadership when it comes to SROs in schools. Several community stakeholders pointed to administrators as the initiators of using SROs in schools. Several participants also indicated that SROs were only able to do what

administrators allowed them to do. A theme rising out of the staff focus group and community stakeholder group was the need for school leadership to work with the HCPD to ensure any issues are resolved with the effectiveness and performance of the SROs.

The focus groups also provided suggestions or recommendations going forward for SROs.

If SROs remain:

- There needs to be more transparency around roles and responsibilities of SROs, how the program is being evaluated, and consequences for ineffective SROs. This information should be provided in multiple languages, and should not always be something that is read. Utilizing audio and video messaging would be beneficial.
- Share safety plans for each school with the community.
- Publish the SRO Code of Conduct.
- Change the climate and messaging around the SRO program to clearly articulate what they are doing.
- Address bias within the SRO program and law enforcement.

If SROs are removed, HCPSS should support students in a more holistic manner through:

- Increase support for peer to peer resolutions of conflicts.
- Provide restorative justice in all schools.
- Support food security and connect with resources.
- Connect families to substance abuse resources and interventions when needed
- Increase bullying prevention and make it safer for students to speak out
- Make sure all students are supported, even when parents cannot be involved because they are working multiple jobs, or for other reason

***Next Steps***

These focus groups were not the final engagement planned on the topic of SROs in HCPSS schools. The chart below outlines important upcoming dates and information on future discussions:

November 12, 2020 6:30 pm -8:00 pm	Howard County Virtual Town Hall on SROs in Schools	A moderated town hall to provide the public an opportunity to share views on SROs in schools.
November 19, 2020	BOE Meeting	BOE can begin having an open debate on the topic of police in schools. HCPSS and Howard County Government staff will be available to report on data collected from focus groups and town hall and answer any questions from BOE. Because this debate could happen over a series of meetings, it may be good to have

		newly elected board members present for this discussion as well to hear the report and/or debate by the current board.
December 7, 2020 (if necessary)	BOE Meeting	If BOE needs another meeting to continue public discussion.
January 21, 2021	BOE Meeting	BOE to take an official action on police in HCPSS schools if so desired.