



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

TITLE: School Resource Officers in Schools Report **DATE:** January 21, 2021

Kevin Gilbert, Director Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
Thomas McNeal, Director Security, Emergency Preparedness and Response
Anissa Dennis, Chief School Management, and Instructional Leadership

PRESENTER(S): 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.

OVERVIEW:

The purpose of this Board report is to provide the Board of Education with an update and potential pathways forward regarding the School Resource Officers (SROs) Program in the Howard County Public School System.

RECOMMENDATION/~~FUTURE DIRECTION~~: Provide direction on scope of implementation plans.

SUBMITTED BY: _____

Kevin Gilbert
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APPROVAL/CONCURRENCE: _____

Michael J. Martirano,
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Superintendent

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School Resource Officers in Howard County Public School System Schools

Background

The debate about the appropriateness of School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools is not a recent phenomenon. There have been countless reports, articles, editorials, and books written on this subject with many people passionately voicing their support on all sides of the debate. With the recent events surrounding the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade and the shooting of Jacob Blake, the debate surrounding the role and accountability of police officers has intensified. School districts across this country are wrestling with not only the impact of these events within their communities, but also the impact of the presence of law enforcement within schools on students, particularly Black and brown students. The Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) is not immune to this debate around SROs, with a public discussion on the matter first occurring during the 2017-2018 school year.

On September 24, 2020, Dr. Martirano and staff presented to the Board of Education of Howard County a report on SROs in HCPSS schools. This report provided background, a review of literature on the topic, highlighted the national debate, and a history of the SRO program in HCPSS. In addition to this information, the report included district-specific information on the current state of the SRO program and provided student arrest data from 2015-2020. Following the report, HCPSS in conjunction with Howard County Government conducted a series of opportunities to obtain input from community stakeholders. The engagements consisted of three focus groups and a community-wide town hall.

The focus groups were conducted on October 5, 12, and 15, 2020, and consisted of students and families, HCPSS staff, and community stakeholders, respectively. On October 22, 2020, HCPSS staff updated the Board on the findings of the focus groups, and then engagement with the community culminated with a virtual town hall on November 12, 2020. In addition to the engagements, an email address, SROinput@hcpss.org, was created for interested parties to send comments about the SRO program that members of the Board have access to view. To conclude matters on the topics, the Board set January 21, 2021, as the date to discuss and, if desired, act on the HCPSS SRO program.

State and National Response to SROs

As the Board has been analyzing reports, looking at data, and engaging the community, districts across Maryland and across the nation have been examining the issue and/or taking action. In the wake of the George Floyd killing, the Minneapolis School District passed a resolution to not renew its memorandum of understanding with the Minneapolis police department, thus removing law enforcement from their schools. In their place, the Minneapolis School District is hiring eleven public safety specialists.¹ Other school districts across the country began removing SROs

¹ Lahm, S. (2020). No more cops in Minneapolis schools? Not quite. Retrieved from <https://progressive.org/public-school-shakedown/no-more-cops-minneapolis-schools-lahm-200721/> and Gotlieb, N. (2020). District hiring replacement for cops. Despite objections. Retrieved from <https://www.southwestjournal.com/news/schools/2020/09/district-hiring-replacements-for-cops-despite-objections/>.

as well, including St. Paul, MN, Oakland, CA, Denver, CO, Charlottesville, VA, San Francisco, CA, Portland, OR, and Rochester, NY.²

Closer to HCPSS, the county executive in Prince George’s County (PGC) created a task force to examine the role of law enforcement in the county, which included SROs in schools. PGC will not be removing SROs from schools, but did recommend investing in mental health programs and restorative approaches to student discipline to help dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline by:

- A. Realigning the Prince George’s County public school’s security protocols.
- B. Restructuring SROs and security personnel.
- C. Updating school safety training requirements.
- D. Establishing school safety data metrics to eventually phase out security personnel.
- E. Investing in prevention and intervention programming for students.³

The Montgomery County Public School System’s Board of Education recently voted to continue looking at the issue and will take action on SROs in May. The workgroup convened to study the matter prior to this decision and did make several recommendations for its Board to consider:

1. Seek community/parent input before determining the status of the SRO program for 2021–2022.
2. Create a permanent “Local Law Enforcement in Schools /Community Policing” work group that meets quarterly throughout the school year.
3. Redefine the job description of the SRO/adequate Local Law Enforcement official to align more closely with the vision and mission of Montgomery County public schools.
4. Work with the Maryland State Department of Education to revise the outdated arrest codes used for student arrests by the state of Maryland.
5. Collaborate with local police departments to review “civil vs. criminal” arrest codes.
6. Create an Adequate Local Law Enforcement Coverage Plan: A pool of officers assigned to each high school/cluster.
7. Develop a system to track SRO/local law enforcement officials’ activities to include classroom-related activities, prevention/intervention actions, and mentoring efforts.
8. Develop an agreement between MCPS and local police departments to eliminate the arrest of students on school property for offenses that occur in the community except in cases of a violent crime where law enforcement officials have been unable to locate the student at home or within the community.
9. Track and review law enforcement (juvenile arrests, interactions) data by school quarterly to determine appropriate interventions to reduce offenses and arrests.
10. Work with community stakeholders to explore the merits of pre-arrest diversion programs.
11. Develop opportunities for SROs/local law enforcement officials to teach students critical problem-solving skills to use when addressing school-related safety/security issues of concern.

² This list is not extensive and does not represent all the districts who removed SROs.

³ Prince George’s County Police Reform Workgroup. (2020). Reimagining policing in Prince George’s county: Report and recommendation. Prince George’s County, MD.

12. Expand training for principals, SROs/local law enforcement officials, pupil personnel workers, counselors, and school security staff around concerns such as community policing, restorative justice, implicit bias, emergency preparedness, and de-escalation.
13. Update the SRO MOU/Adequate Local Law Enforcement Coverage agreement.
14. Involve parent/guardian and school community stakeholders in the hiring of SRO/adequate local law enforcement staff.
15. Seek input from principals in the performance evaluation of SROs.
16. Work with national experts to implement a School-Justice Partnership Model with the police, the State Attorney’s Office, and MCPS.
17. Evaluate the SRO/local law enforcement official program to determine its efficacy in 2021–2022.⁴

Additionally, there are two pieces of legislation being introduced in the General Assembly that could potentially impact SROs in Maryland schools:

- A. Delegate Atterbeary from Howard County is sponsoring **Ho.Co. 10-21 Howard County Board of Education – School Safety Personnel.**⁵ This bill:
 - a. Requires that a plan developed by the Board of Education of Howard County be in alignment with guidelines developed by the Maryland Center for School Safety and must prohibit the assignment of school resource officers (SROs) to schools in the county.
 - b. Requires that the school system still use adequate local law enforcement coverage to implement the requirements under the Safe to Learn Act.

- B. Senator Ellis from Charles County is sponsoring **SB0245 Public Schools - School Resource Officers - Requirements and Prohibitions.**⁶ This bill:
 - a. Prohibits, statewide, school resource officers from entering a school building unless under the following circumstances:
 - i. responding to violence or the threat of violence,
 - ii. to participate in specialized instruction, or
 - iii. to use a school restroom.
 - b. The bill further requires school resource officers to:
 - i. conceal weapons unless responding to an emergency involving violence, and
 - ii. wear civilian clothing at all times while on a school campus or inside a school building, and

⁴ Montgomery County Public School District. (2020). Request for student arrest data and the school resource officer program. Memorandum to Board of Education. Montgomery County, MD.

⁵ This bill is under consideration by the Howard County Delegation for introduction to the Maryland General Assembly, and a local hearing was held on November 17, 2020.

⁶ This bill has been pre-filed for the 2021 session and an initial hearing is scheduled before the Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee on January 27, 2021.

- iii. prohibits a school resource officer from participating in the routine school discipline of a student.

Finally, in the report updating the Board on the focus group engagement in Howard County, the focus groups provided suggestions going forward for SROs. If SROs remain, the suggested recommendations were:

- A. To be more transparent 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 read, and the use of audio and video messaging would be beneficial.
- B. To share safety plans for each school with the community.
- C. To publish the SRO Code of Conduct.
- D. To change the climate and messaging around the SRO program to clearly articulate what they are doing.
- E. To address bias within the SRO program and law enforcement.

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

- A. Increasing support for peer-to-peer resolutions of conflicts.
- B. Providing restorative justice in all schools.
- C. Supporting food security and connect with resources.
- D. Connecting families to substance abuse resources and interventions when needed.
- E. Increasing bullying prevention and making it safer for students to speak out.
- F. Making sure all students are supported, even when parents cannot be involved because they are working multiple jobs, or for other reason.

Pathway Forward

With the conclusion of reports and engagements on the topic of SROs in HCPSS, the Board has an opportunity to reimagine what it means to be safe in our schools. With that said, there are two potential pathways the Board can consider going forth:

- A. Completely remove school resource officers from our schools and replace those positions with a complement of alternative education teachers, social workers, counselors, and security assistants. If the SRO program is removed, HCPSS will need to develop a strategy and plan to provide not only adequate law enforcement coverage as outlined by the Maryland Safe to Learn Act of 2018 but also to provide the necessary emotional and social emotional supports to create a safe learning environment for all students.
- B. Develop a plan that retains school resource officers with changes to the program, and a smaller complement of alternative education teachers, social workers, and counselors. Changes to the SRO program would include a revised MOU and enhanced training. This pathway would keep the SRO program in HCPSS schools but offer specific changes and tighter accountability measures while expanding the focus on restorative practices and increasing other supports for students.

Conclusion

It is clear through our engagement process that the Howard County Public School System must make changes to how we approach safety and security. The current status quo cannot continue. The Board should consider taking action by directing the Superintendent to develop plans based on both paths outlined in this report. These plans should include an implementation timeline and budget. Once the plans have been presented and approved, the Board can make a final decision on removing or retaining SROs.