# Developing Safe Schools Partnerships with Law Enforcement

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**Abstract**

Safe schools are the concern of communities throughout the world. If a school is safe, and if children feel safe, students are better able to learn. But what are the steps to make this happen? First, it is important to understand the problem: What are the threats to school safety? These include crime-related behaviors that find their way to school each day, such as alcohol and other drug use, aggressive and violent behavior, self-destructive behavior, and the impact of child abuse. But communities also need to understand the challenges that exist when it comes to law enforcement—a key partner—working in collaboration with schools to help ensure safety. Because law enforcement and school personnel differ in so many ways, they face challenges in the areas of communications, perception, roles, responsibilities, and data sharing.

After defining the challenges, communities can build on the consensus that already exists—that safe schools are everyone's business. Evidence-based strategies implemented with fidelity can increase the likelihood of success. Communities can employ a variety of strategies to overcome the challenges law enforcement faces in working effectively in schools by identifying leadership that fosters mutual trust, choosing and training law enforcement officers best suited for proactive work, and finding effective ways for law enforcement and school personnel to work in partnership carrying out complementary roles and responsibilities.

## Introduction

The safety-learning connection is clear—if schools are not safe, children will not find themselves in an environment in which they can learn. Crime and its related problems create an unfavorable environment for academic success (Bauer et al., 2008, 13; Finnish Centre for Health Promotion 2006, 7). Students show higher academic achievement where there is a safe and orderly environment (Janerette 2005, 4), just as safety is a prerequisite for other kinds of development in society (Bodson 2008, 136). Effective school-based violence prevention programs show a number of positive effects, including improvements in school achievement (Hahn 2007, 8). A protective environment is conducive to learning (Prinsloo 2007, 47; UNICEF 2009, 16).

The protection of children in schools is a constant challenge for societies around the world. Acts of violence in schools have occurred around the world and have been a real concern in diverse countries (Benbenishty and Astor 2008, 59-60; Smith 2003, 1). But the protection of children in schools is a challenge that governments and communities have recognized and responded to

(Australian Government Department of Education 2003; Fuchs 2008, 20; National Centre for Policing Excellence 2005, 20; European Commission Ministry of Education and Training 1997; Morrone 2008, 1; United States Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice 2009; Shaw 2001; Leblanc 2008, 11; Blaya 2006; Dorn 2007, 14). The literature on school violence and its prevention is well established (Jimerson and Furlong 2006). There is an extensive and varied body of literature on how the community affects individual behavior (Benbenishty and Astor 2005, 17). This includes Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work on child development being influenced by the microsystem (of the developing person), mesosystem (immediate social settings of the home, school, and neighborhood), exosystem (such as the parent's workplace), and macrosystem (wider society and culture). Related literature includes the social ecology work of Earls (2001, 143) on "social cohesion," which, from large-scale epidemiological examination of the causes and consequences of children's exposure to community and family violence, shows how values like mutual trust and looking out for each other seem to make communities safer. Other literature related to the formation of the child looks at the neurobiology of development in the social context, where there is interplay between brain development, early life experiences, and the inseparability of genetics and environment—"neurons to neighborhoods." (Shonkoff et al. 2000, 39).

Safe schools require a broad-based effort by partners in many sectors of the community, including educators, students, parents, community-based organizations, and law enforcement (Shaw 2004, 97; Waterman 2009, 8; Shaw 2001, 21; Rosiak 2004a; Sprague and Walker 2002, 1). This article discusses the particular role of a key segment of society—law enforcement— in keeping children safe in the school environment. While law enforcement officers are not the only participants in providing security in the school and community (Arrington 2006, 34; The Northeast Center for the Application of Prevention Technology; National Crime Prevention Council 1999, 3), they do play a central role. Educators and those who provide security have different roles; both must be respectful and supportive of the tasks of different partners (Hylton 1996, xiii).

Ensuring the public safety is the mission of law enforcement officers in the community. The need for law enforcement to be part of the safe school equation is increasingly accepted (Department for Children, Schools, and Families 2008, 31). This need is reinforced by the growing attitude that no school can assume that school violence such as shootings "cannot happen here" (Fiel, eschoolnews). But the safety of the public, including the safety of our schools, involves the entire community working together. Public safety is broader than just enforcement of the law (Rosiak 2004b). Many problems in the community are manifested in the school every day, so it is fitting and necessary that law enforcement officers work with the schools *and* other community partners in providing safe and healthy school environments.

The job of law enforcement officers working in the schools is widely recognized as involving multiple roles, including carrying out their sworn duty to enforce the law (Fields, 2002), and going beyond that traditional role to also include educator and resource/problem solver (Dash et al., 78). In fact, many school resource officers (SROs) indicate that the activities they spend most of their time performing do not involve enforcement of the law (Eisert 2005, 16). At the same time, collaboration between the schools and the police is not easy (Lovell 2005, 19; Uchida, et al. 2006, 31). The law may apply differently in the school than in the community (James 2009, 14).

This article describes the experience of those who have been working in the safe schools arena in the U.S. for many years. The article is informed by the experience of law enforcement officers working in schools, including SROs and other police assigned to work in schools, in partnership with school, mental health staff, and other agencies concerned with child welfare. The information presented herein conveys the experience of the Federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative in the U.S., which is supported by a joint effort of the U.S. Departments of Education, Justice, and Health and Human Services.

**Understanding the Problem**

Prior to addressing the problem of school safety, it is critical to understand the crime-related behaviors that present themselves in school each day. Violence, theft, bullying, drugs, and weapons in schools are widespread (Dinkes et al., 2009, 3). These problems vary by community

but may include: truancy, loitering, vandalism, graffiti, bullying, gangs, fighting and other aggressive or violent behavior, theft, weapon carrying, alcohol and other drug use, self-destructive behavior, and child abuse.

**The Challenges Law Enforcement Face Working in the Schools**

Law enforcement officers working in schools have identified other issues needing attention, including: How the law enforcement officer handles dangerous or illegal behavior; school crisis planning and management; school security; safety policies; educational programs; homeland security; and partnership activities.

The experience of the field shows the importance of understanding the challenges that exist when it comes to law enforcement working in partnership with schools. What are these *challenges*? These challenges include how law enforcement and schools are different in a number of ways: They have different jobs to do. They have different missions: Schools educate; law enforcement agencies protect the public's safety. The two professions come from very different perspectives—they represent different professional cultures. They have different perceptions of each other's profession. They may have different expectations when it comes to things such as discipline in schools. School administrators discipline a student's inappropriate behavior. A law enforcement officer can legally charge someone with disorderly conduct or assault.

School and law enforcement officials often operate according to different rules. For example, law enforcement officers are sworn to uphold the penal law; school officials have a school code of rules to enforce. Law enforcement officers sometimes have different standards to operate by; for example, a patrol police officer (not an SRO) in the U.S. can search a locker if there is the level of evidence known as "probable cause" but a school official only needs "reasonable suspicion" (Tessaro 2008, 29; James 2008, 14).

Law enforcement officers and schools may not effectively communicate with each other about their respective roles or share information they have relevant to school safety. This lack of communication may result in confusion in assisting students or an overlap of services. It may

also mean that a student's needs are not being met because of the assumption that someone else is dealing with that student.

There may be a particular negative community perception about law enforcement (Terrill and Reisig 2003, 295) that does not welcome the officer in the school, even viewing law enforcement as an "occupying force." This sometimes results in the community rejecting the presence of the police in the schools or requesting that the officer not be armed with a firearm weapon, if that is part of their standard gear. In this case, the law enforcement agency will typically insist upon the officers wearing that weapon, as it is an essential part of their equipment. This situation may result in the officer not being allowed to work in the school. In addition, some schools reject an SRO because of the concern that having law enforcement present in the school sends the "wrong message" that the school is an unsafe place because a law enforcement officer is there.

When a law enforcement officer works in the school, it may not be clear whom he or she works for—the police chief/sheriff or the school principal? Likewise, there may be conflict over jurisdiction. Questions arise: When is a particular behavior or activity a matter for law enforcement or one better handled by the school authorities? When should the school police department (if such an entity is present) turn a matter over to the city police? If there is an overlap of services, such as a school crisis management drill, is it clear who supervises the operation?

Another challenge is that of information sharing: When is it acceptable to share data about young people? Are the limits clear? What are the laws that enable or restrict the sharing of information? Are these laws understood and practiced, using memoranda of agreement, information releases, court orders, or other vehicles that enable the sharing of information?

Finally, another challenge for law enforcement working in schools (as well as for school personnel and other community agencies) is dealing with the growing number of cultural and linguistic differences in the community: How do the police and the school staff serve what may be an increasingly diverse student population? How do the police help the victims of crime deal

with appropriate human services in a cultural context (Snajdr and Vyortkin 2001, 6)? Is the officer trained to deal with people from different cultures that require a special understanding and sensitivity because of their experience with law enforcement in their country of origin?

**Taking Advantage of the Consensus**

After recognizing and naming the challenges that exist, the school and law enforcement agency—along with the other community partners involved—can begin by building on the consensus that typically exists—that safe schools are everyone's business. There is general agreement that members across the community want schools that are safe and have a positive climate; there is a shared goal to create a crime-free environment where learning can take place (Trump 2004, 301). The combined roles of representatives from different sectors of the community are critical to the success of efforts to address safety (Dash et al., 77). Communities acknowledge that schools face crime-related behaviors each day, so law enforcement, because it deals with crime and crime-related behaviors, needs to be a key player.

Some school staff members may see community partnership activities as peripheral to academic performance, rather than central to achieving it (United States Department of Education 2001, 22). In fact, higher academic performance is related to more comprehensive community or environmental programming that is effective in reducing delinquent behaviors (Zins et al. 2003). This more comprehensive approach attempts to prevent problem behavior by altering the environments in which children grow (Klitzner 1998). Communities deal with crime-related behaviors by taking a comprehensive approach, meaning working in partnership to prevent problem behaviors, intervening in targeted and effective ways, enforcing laws when they need to be enforced, and providing mental health and other treatment to address underlying problems that manifest themselves in inappropriate behavior. Solving the problems of substance abuse and violence among youth requires comprehensive approaches. (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention 2009a). These comprehensive efforts involving partnerships and collaborations among agencies are more effective when connected to a project early and throughout the life cycle (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention 2009b). Because of the complexity of the issues involved, law enforcement

must work effectively with school and mental health partners from the outset to promote safe and healthy schools.

Research indicates that effective community collaborations are part of a comprehensive effort that includes skills-based instruction for students and families; policies designed to promote environments where substance abuse is not accepted; policies that reduce the availability of and access to alcohol, drugs, and weapons; enforcement of these policies; and counseling and skills training for families and students at high risk for substance abuse and violence (Northeast Center for the Application of Prevention Technology). Because of the complexity of each of these prevention or intervention strategies, it is clear that multiple partners, including law enforcement where they can be a resource, must be involved to implement them.

**Employing Evidence-Based Strategies**

Addressing school safety requires using strategies that are proven effective, or at least built upon research-based practices (Center for Substance Abuse Prevention 2009; Sprague 2002, 23). When evidence-based strategies are "implemented with fidelity" (as intended by the program developer) there is an increased likelihood that the intervention will have its intended effect of reducing violence or drug abuse (or whatever the program goal is). Many years of experience have shown that strategies that target children and families are more likely to be effective if they are combined with strategies involving the broader school and community in a supportive environment (Quinn et al. 1998, 26). Activities are also more effective when efforts have broad support. Decisions by the group are more likely to be decisions that are owned and carried out, so are more likely to be effective. This type of collaboration, where school-community partners, including law enforcement, share a vision and combine their missions, is going to be more effective because of the long-term trust and cooperation that will be sustained (Dash et al. 2003, 80).

What evidence supports the work of the SROs in schools? According to common belief, having SROs working in schools is a positive strategy to make schools safer. Many law enforcement officers and school staff members would agree that having SROs in the schools is a supportive

strategy to contribute to school safety. But what is the evidence related to SROs and a reduction of school-based crime? As Finn et al. point out (2005a, 34), in the U.S. there is a lack of empirical evidence that the SRO program is effective in crime reduction in schools. There is substantial anecdotal evidence supporting SRO work in schools. But in this era that demands "evidence-based practices," what do we really know from the research?

First, there are research data that show a number of benefits of having SROs in schools (Finn et al. 2005a, 34-39): for example, when students have a positive opinion of the SRO, they are more likely to report a crime, and to feel safe in school. Students and staff report feeling safe with SROs in school, and many believe that the SROs have reduced bullying and fighting. SROs improve the perceptions young people and others in the community have of law enforcement officers; and the SRO program helps create and maintain the law enforcement agency's reputation in the community.

In addition to strong anecdotal evidence and results from surveys that show positive benefits of having SROs in schools, what evidence presently exists that shows that having the SROs in schools produces the outcome of reduced crime and violence? From a research point of view, one of the key challenges is defining and measuring just what an SRO does. The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) spells out the triad model for SROs where the officer is: 1) teaching, 2) counseling, and 3) enforcing the law in the school (National Association of School Resource Officers; Finn et al. 2005b, 112-116). But defining how each of those activities takes place, given their varied forms in local situations, and measuring them in a reliable manner is an evaluation challenge related to how these activities reduce crime in schools. Clearly, more research is needed to quantify the effectiveness of SROs. This research would be consistent with the increasing interest in studying more focused policing efforts that target very specific places and crimes (Skogan and Frydl 2004, 235). Related research shows that the strongest evidence in support of policing efforts is about hot spot crime reduction strategies (Weisburd and Braga, Eds. 2006, 232); this methodology could be directed at a more focused measure of SRO activities.

**The Keys to Addressing the Challenges of Law Enforcement Working With Schools**

After identifying the problems and challenges and agreeing on the importance of comprehensive action, communities are in a position to employ specific strategies to overcome the challenges to law enforcement working effectively in schools. The experience of law enforcement officers working in schools indicates involvement in several general strategy areas: Providing leadership, hiring/training/evaluating the right law enforcement officer and carrying out partnership activities.

**Law Enforcement Providing Leadership**

To help make schools safe for students, law enforcement officials need to provide leadership (Atkinson 2002, 18; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory 2002b, 18). This leadership entails defining who participates in the safe schools process, recognizing that people at different levels of command can lead (sometimes it is the chief of police, other times the sergeant in charge of the SROs may be the driving law enforcement officer involved in the safe schools process), and developing the vision law enforcement shares with other community partners. While schools and law enforcement have different purposes, their missions do intersect around children being safe in schools. It takes leadership to agree to participate in a common mission.

Law enforcement can provide leadership by using memoranda of understanding (MOUs) or memoranda of agreement (MOAs) to define procedures and responsibilities. It is important to clarify that the law enforcement officer in school is not doing the job of the school's vice principal in charge of discipline. Leadership can also facilitate the police serving as experts in enforcement topics (such as crisis response), as well as show mutual trust/respect of other partners.

**Hiring/Training/Evaluating the Law Enforcement Officer for Work in Schools**

Law enforcement can provide leadership by hiring/training/evaluating the right law enforcement officer to work in schools by involving school administrators in the interview process. It is critical that the school administration have a say in what particular officer is assigned to work in the schools. In some schools, the MOU spells out that the education superintendent or other

administrator from the school must approve the officer. Educators need to at least be a part of the interview process before the SRO is hired. When school administrators are involved in the selection process for hiring the SRO, there is a better match between the SRO and the school and there is an increased acceptance of the SRO and program among school staff (Finn, et al., 2005b, 68). The law enforcement officer who is more skilled in working with young people and more interested in working in an educational setting is more effective in the job. School and law enforcement leaders can ensure that the law enforcement officer chosen to work as an SRO is a role model for the students and the adults in the school and community.

Law enforcement and school supervisors can provide training opportunities to enhance skills needed for working with young people. This may involve in-service training on issues the school is confronting, such as drugs or gangs. But it could be training on other issues, such as handling truancy. When it comes to evaluating the performance of the officer, the supervisor should look at the full scope of duties in schools, including prevention, intervention, and enforcement activities. In many cases, the traditional job of law enforcement is reactive, with officers responding to dangerous or potentially dangerous situations. It is important to also acknowledge and evaluate the proactive measures the SRO takes. This evaluation requires input from the school and the law enforcement supervisor.

**Law Enforcement Officers Carrying Out Partnership Activities**

Police can carry out partnership activities in a variety of ways, including adopting the various roles of the SRO Triad Model—teacher, counselor, and law enforcement officer (Rosiak 2008). SROs are involved in teaching students a variety of topics, including law-related education, drug abuse, and bullying and gang prevention. SROs and other police from the community are also resources to educate staff and parents about behaviors they need to be aware of, such as signs of alcohol or other drug use, gang involvement, cyberbullying, or “sexting” (nude or semi-nude photos being sent via cell phone (Dannahey 2009, 35).

In practice, many SROs spend more time in schools counseling or mentoring students than anything else. Many SROs find that one of their main roles is to be a counselor/tutor/mentor to

students who may not have other positive adults in their lives. Establishing these trusting relationships by being present and showing concern puts the officers in a position to guide a student to a professional able to address a special need, such as a mental health concern. The ability to relate to students also affords the SRO to collect "intelligence" that may help prevent or intervene in criminal or other problematic behavior. A recent example of the value of this trusting relationship with students occurred in Maryland with one of the boys apprehended in a plot to set off a bomb intended to kill the school principal. When school administrators detained the boy he said he wanted to talk to the SRO, to whom he confessed the details of the plot (Dongu 2009).

Police will also carry out their law enforcement responsibilities, as the situation requires. The presence of an SRO in a school already places the officer on the scene, should an emergency or other need for a trained first responder arise. This has the added advantage of not requiring an officer from the community—one who does not have the relationships the SRO has developed—to leave that assignment to come to the school. SROs can deter crime or prevent a potentially explosive situation through their presence in a school.

In addition to teaching, counseling, and enforcement roles, SROs can engage in proactive activities such as: meetings, consultations, mediation, referrals, and follow-up with students and staff. Law enforcement officers can engage in learning from other partners. As a police officer in one Safe Schools/Healthy Students site related, "The mental health counselor taught me that when a kid is acting up, he may just be *acting out* some other problem." Partnership entails sharing information with schools and other agencies concerned with the child's welfare (using multiple agency agreements). This may mean sharing information across law enforcement jurisdictions. It requires knowing laws on sharing information about adjudicated youth and listening to observations and warning signs. According to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) legislation in the U.S., educators are allowed to share verbal information about behaviors they have observed. These observations may lead to troubled students getting the help they need when the officer makes referrals to mental health partners.

Law enforcement officers are often in a position where they witness the trauma students face. It is important that they know where to refer people for appropriate help to deal with their needs. Information sharing may involve communicating about students re-entering school from other juvenile programs, such as detention or other placements. Sharing information means sharing observations about the communities from which the students come. As one SRO in a Safe Schools/Healthy Students project said, "The officers can flag a location and identify the conditions that might require a social worker to help someone from that neighborhood." Other Safe Schools/Healthy Students sites have worked with law enforcement officers to help develop "safe corridors" where parents and other community members monitor a safe route for children to take to and from school. Officers can also share their street experience and training about searches, drugs, threat assessment, and truancy strategies with the school staff. In addition, the police can conduct joint training with school/city/county police, and other partners on such topics as verbal judo, where those trained learn how to use words to de-escalate a potentially violent situation, and managing a school crisis).

**Preparing Law Enforcement Officers for Work in Schools**

To prepare for work in schools, law enforcement officials need to participate in the development of an MOU with the school (Johnson 2009) that defines policies, goals, and objectives for the law enforcement agency and the school. Police administrators need to recruit and hire the officer for effective relations in the school. They need to train the officer through professional associations such as the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), and governmental organizations like the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office in the U.S., and state or regional law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement administrators need to develop the tools to document proactive measures the SRO takes in the schools.

**Preparing Schools for Law Enforcement to Work in the Educational Environment**

At the same time, to prepare for the law enforcement officer working in the school, schools need to: Develop an MOU with the law enforcement agency; work with the law enforcement chief executive, such as the police chief or sheriff; interview the law enforcement candidates being considered for the SRO position; learn roles the officer can play in school, working with both

students and staff; use the officer in proactive ways; and participate in partnership efforts with the law enforcement agency.

## Conclusion

Communities wanting to more effectively address issues of school safety need to take a comprehensive approach that draws upon many different resources in the community. Law enforcement officers can play a number of important roles in a community's comprehensive approach toward making schools safer. After understanding the differences law enforcement officers have with educators and the complementary roles they play with other community partners—such as educators, mental health providers, and juvenile justice workers—the police, especially SROs, can engage in more productive, cooperative efforts to prevent, intervene in, and suppress crime-related behaviors in schools. Critical activities for police working with the schools include providing leadership that supports law enforcement's varied roles in schools, hiring/training/evaluating the officer for work in schools, and carrying out effective partnership activities.

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