

Why Remove and Replace the Armed School Police Officers?

The School armed police officer is also known as a School Resource Officer or SRO

By Asma Elhuni : Rights and Democracy

We are organizing to remove the armed police officer also known as School Resource Officer from Lebanon school systems and reinvest the savings in transformative responses in discipline, mental health and social services that create a nurturing and positive school climate for all students. We are calling for this action because the safety, care, and protection of every child in our community is our top priority-- without that baseline, learning can not happen.

I didn't even know that Lebanon Schools had a School Resource Officer!

Yes. There has been an SRO in the district. Police have been present, in some form, in American Schools since the 1940's. The Reagan Era and War on Drugs both broadly increased police budgets and national incarceration rates. The 1990's brought federal funding to communities like ours to fund SRO positions and increase militarization of police departments. From 1997-2003 the number of school police officers placed in schools grew from 9,400 in 1997 to 14,337 in 2003. Lebanon is not immune to the broader movement toward criminalization, militarization and incarceration. ([SOURCE](#))

Schools have finite resources, and those resources should be allocated towards proven models for student safety and well-being.

Each school has a student assistant provider, but they are often busy during the day and not available for immediate needs. Rather than putting money towards the presence of an SRO, funds should go towards additional mental health workers who would be available during crisis moments. Initiatives that prioritize student needs, prevent criminalization and improve school climate should be the funding priority

Students of color are disproportionately impacted by the presence of School Resource Officers.

In the 2014-2015 academic year 4.9% of New Hampshire students received some form of out-of-school suspension. However, these suspensions were not apportioned evenly. While students of color made up 13.9 percent of the student population, they comprised approximately 22.7 percent of students receiving population, they comprised approximately 38 percent of students receiving out-of-school suspensions out-of-school suspensions.

Similarly, while students with disabilities made up 20.3 percent of the student population, they comprised approximately 38 percent of students receiving out-of-school suspensions.

The system itself, with conscious intent or not, has been designed for racial bias and inequity. To promote safety together with equity, we must commit to a restorative model where policies, personnel and disciplinary practices align to create a safe and supportive learning environment where all children can flourish.

The history and current climate of policing in America mean that SRO's presence in schools negatively affects student's sense of safety.

Students of color are not immune to what is happening outside the walls of their schools. They know that being Black, Brown and/or disabled means they are at a higher risk of being targeted, assaulted or even killed by a police officer. Now those officers have unfettered access to their school. Police officers in the school do not create a feeling of safety for BIPOC and disabled students.

School Boards across the country have taken the decisive step to remove School Resource Officers and to cancel contracts with law enforcement with the knowledge that students of color, students with disabilities and other marginalized students are disproportionately impacted by biased policing – a symptom of the structural racism inherent in our nation. Vermont schools are not immune from this structural racism - they reflect society at large.

Racial Bias is well documented in Lebanon Police Departments. The SRO is a Lebanon Police Officer.

In the 2017-2018 school year, Black students made up 3% of the Lebanon student population but at least 7.8% of in-school suspensions, at least¹ 4.3% of out-of-school suspensions, and at least 5.6% of referrals to law enforcement. In the 2017-2018 school year, students with disabilities made up 19.8% of the Lebanon student population but 34.8% of referrals to law enforcement, in other words, referrals to adults who simply don't have the professional training to understand a student's special needs, and who have license to use force in response to behavior that they don't understand. In the 2017-2018 school year, there were a total of 89 referrals to law enforcement (for students of all identities). [Source](#)

What does a future without SROs look like?

All students deserve to attend schools where they are safe, supported, and respected. School safety means the creation of a supportive environment where students are free from physical harm, violence and bullying at the hands of both students and adults. [SOURCE](#)

A future without SRO's means building and maintaining a system for restorative or transformative justice that has a strong level of student engagement. Parent engagement and involvement in discipline issues also proves to be a safe and effective method for settling

conflict. The school should also invest in a broader, trauma-informed support staff, including counselors, advisors, and mental health professionals.

To keep youth safe, districts must use proactive strategies like restorative justice, rather than reactive strategies like school police. These strategies maintain school safety by addressing the underlying root causes of student behavior and target mental health supports to students before they consider violence. These strategies also create community within the classroom and help build relationships between students and adults. [SOURCE](#)

School Resource Officers are armed, uniformed and their job is to enforce the law.

The purpose of police is to enforce the law. Even if a student's actions are developmentally appropriate and easily handled by school disciplinary policy, the police are required to take action when a law has been broken. The presence of an SRO in school means that a student will be defined as a criminal when it may not be necessary. This is even more likely to happen to students of color, and students with disabilities.

When we compare the use of counselors to police, we see that with counselors, student information is safe. It is held in confidence. If a student shares information, or admits something to a school resource officer, it can be used against the student. That is an abuse of the relationship." [SOURCE](#)

SROs lack the appropriate training for working with students.

Law enforcement officers are often not qualified to work with children. Roughly 25 percent of school police surveyed by Education Week stated that they had no experience with youth before working in schools. Police are trained to focus on law and order, not student social and emotional well-being. This lack of training undermines effective behavior management. The tools of law enforcement like pepper spray, handcuffs, tasers, and guns are inappropriate and dangerous in the classroom. A 2018 report by the Advancement Project documented and mapped over 60 instances of police brutality in schools over the past eight years. [SOURCE](#)

SOURCES:

- [Keeping kids in School: The Urgent Need for Reform of School Discipline in NH](#)
- [The Sentencing Project - Dangers of Added Police in Schools](#)
- [Advancement Projects Action Kit](#)
- [Colorlines - Reform, Abolish or Defund the Police—Explained](#)