

Public Comment from Shin-Yi Lin, Ph.D. and Matt Weber, Ph.D.
(West Windsor residents and parents of three kids under the age of 6)
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Summary statement:

The placement of Class III SRO officers into West Windsor-Plainsboro Schools is premature at best and ill-advised at worst, given the lack of convincing data and the cost relative to other, demonstrably beneficial interventions. This policy is based on good intentions and anecdotal evidence, but is offered without the necessary supporting research showing reliable positive outcomes, and without clearly stated safeguards in place to protect against potential, foreseeable negative outcomes.

Point 1: The placement of Class III SRO Officers is not an evidence-based policy

- While Superintendent Aderhold quoted a 2013 NJ SAFE Task Force report in his presentation to the School Board in support of Class III SROs, the report ignores critically important context: ***Their recommendations are not based on a clear consensus of data or statistical/behavioral analysis.***
- In fact, many non-partisan public and private sector research organizations have found inconclusive evidence for the benefit of SROs:
 - The non-partisan Congressional Research Service found that research on the effectiveness of SRO programs is:
 - ***limited***, both in terms of the number of studies published and the methodological rigor of the studies conducted, and
 - ***inconclusive*** about whether SRO programs are effective at reducing school violence.” (pg 10, “School Resource Officers: Law Enforcement Officers in Schools”)
 - Similar findings of a lack of conclusive evidence have been found by
 - “The School Discipline Consensus Report” (2014, The Council of State Governments Justice Center);
 - The “NJ School Security Task Force Report” (2015)
- There is no evidence that armed police officers are able to prevent a low probability, high casualty event like a mass shooting. Evidence from the shootings at Columbine and Stoneman Douglas indicate the opposite. Further, there is also no conclusive evidence that SROs make schools safer in general. So we need to base any implementation of SROs on their purported beneficial functions as educators, counselors, and liaisons with local law enforcement.
- In 2015, Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which replaced the No Child Left Behind Act. ESSA emphasizes the need to use “***evidence-based*** activities, strategies, and interventions” in public schools. **Are we meeting this standard with our consideration of SROs?**

Point 2: Class III SRO Officers in our schools could exacerbate existing problems in disciplinary treatment of underrepresented minorities

- In the West Windsor-Plainsboro school district, African-American and Hispanic students account for 9.7% of enrolled students, but around 40% of suspensions (2015, Civil Rights Data Collection, Department of Education). Superintendent Aderhold has provided no publicly-shared analysis of whether the presence of SROs could amplify our current crisis in disproportionate treatment of students.

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- In the absence of any research or analysis addressing ***how this policy will impact our most vulnerable students***, we have to take seriously reports that the presence of SROs can have a negative impact on perceived school safety by students of color and can increase the criminalization of minor offenses.
- In 2014, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice collaborated on a School Discipline Guidance Package to emphasize public schools' obligation under federal law to avoid unfair disciplinary practices. ***We need to be very aware of the legal obligations and any increased scrutiny we are inviting if we put into place expensive, poorly supported programs.***

Point 3: It will be difficult to hire high-quality Class III SRO Officers because of a lack of uniformity among NJ police union contracts

- The Police Union Contract Project has identified that police union contracts, including those in New Jersey, vary in their provisions regarding the handling and reporting of officer misconduct complaints (also see "The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing," 2015). This means that we may not have access to a ***complete and honest record*** of conduct for SRO candidates. ***How will we be able to ensure we are hiring the highest quality applicants?***

Point 4: Alternate and More Cost-Effective models exist to address the issues that the SRO policy seeks to address

- Guidance counselors and mental health professionals currently monitor school climate and build relationships with our students, two of the articulated goals for SROs, but they have already been working for years in the schools and could afford to be scaled up at ***lower cost***. Similarly, models for more expansive community-based specialist positions exist that would provide an alternative to SROs and not present the dangers of introducing firearms into schools and the potential harm of increased law enforcement presence in schools. These models promote an educational environment of positive discipline, a concept firmly supported by existing research (see the School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) program and "Counselors not Cops" by the non-profit Dignity in Schools).

Point 5: If West Windsor-Plainsboro goes ahead with the placement of SROs in our schools, we insist on provisions to provide the necessary oversight of this insufficiently evidence-based initiative

- Any approval for SROs should include:
 - ***dedicated funding*** for regular, publicly available reporting on ***measurable benchmarks*** for SRO positive and negative outcomes and the ongoing cost of the SRO program.
 - a transparent process for reporting complaints of SRO misconduct, including the establishment of a community-based oversight board with ***clear oversight and authority*** that includes all stakeholders (including parent and student leaders).
 - a revision of the Shared Service Agreement being considered by the School Board from a five year contract, to a two year one, given the lack of data and associated costs. This would allow for ***timely*** reassessment given any new data collected at the local and national level.

Notable Resources: Reports comprehensively addressing the effectiveness of SROs in public schools

1. "The School Discipline Consensus Report" (2014) Council of State Governments Justice Center
2. "School Resource Officers: Law Enforcement Officers in Schools" (2013) Congressional Research Service