

Testimony to the House Education Committee on the Importance of School Resource Officers (SROs)

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Executive Summary

This testimony advocates for the critical role of School Resource Officers (SROs) in protecting students, staff, and school communities across all educational settings in Pennsylvania. As schools face evolving threats such as increased violence, cyberbullying, and mental health crises, the presence of trained SROs is essential. Over the last 20 years, schools have implemented new security measures, but these are only effective when paired with skilled personnel who can respond to emergencies, prevent incidents, and foster positive relationships within the school environment.

Key points covered include:

1. **The Role of SROs:** SROs are more than law enforcement officers—they serve as educators, mentors, and crisis responders. They work closely with students and staff to identify early signs of trouble, intervene in conflicts, provide guidance, and respond immediately to emergencies such as active shooter incidents. Their presence builds trust within the school community while deterring violence and crime.
2. **Types of Schools Benefiting from SROs:** SROs provide valuable security and support in public, private, and parochial schools, as well as in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Each type of school benefits from SROs based on its unique challenges:
 - Urban schools face challenges like high crime rates, gang activity, and external threats. SROs are crucial for managing these risks, responding quickly to emergencies, and fostering trust between students and law enforcement.
 - Suburban schools experience growing student populations and threats such as cyberbullying, targeted violence, and social media risks. SROs help prevent violence and manage student safety amid these expanding challenges.
 - Rural schools are often isolated and lack immediate access to emergency services. SROs in rural areas provide vital crisis response, address substance abuse issues, and ensure external threats are managed effectively.
 - Private and parochial schools face unique security challenges, including religious or ideological threats, potential targeting of affluent students, and limited administrative resources. SROs are essential for providing tailored security strategies in these settings.

3. **Challenges and Needs Based on School Level:** The presence and role of an SRO differ according to the school level—high school, middle school, or elementary school. Each level presents distinct safety concerns:
 - **High Schools:** Due to larger student populations and increased risks such as drug use, bullying, and external threats, high schools benefit from SROs focused on crime prevention, de-escalating conflicts, and rapid emergency response. High schools are also vulnerable to targeted violence, making SRO presence critical for both security and prevention.
 - **Middle Schools:** Middle school students are at a formative stage, often dealing with peer pressure, bullying, and emotional challenges. SROs in middle schools play a proactive role in early intervention, conflict resolution, and providing guidance to students who may be at risk of behavioral issues. Their mentorship is vital to preventing small conflicts from escalating into more serious problems.
 - **Elementary Schools:** While younger children are less likely to engage in serious violent behavior, elementary schools still face external threats, such as intruders or targeted violence. SROs in elementary schools ensure a rapid response to any danger while also contributing to a positive perception of law enforcement. Their presence can help create a secure learning environment and foster early trust in police officers.
4. **Response Time Advantage:** One of the most significant benefits of having an SRO on-site is their ability to respond immediately to emergencies. In crises such as active shooter situations, SROs can intervene quickly, using their knowledge of the school's layout and security protocols. This rapid response can mitigate harm and save lives, far surpassing the efficiency of relying on external officers who may take time to arrive.
5. **Changes in School Safety:** Over the past two decades, schools have enhanced their security infrastructure with features like electronic locks, surveillance systems, and controlled building access. However, these advancements require the human element that SROs provide. New threats such as cyberbullying, mental health crises, and the growing accessibility of weapons necessitate the presence of SROs to maintain a safe school environment. Their combination of law enforcement skills and mentorship makes them indispensable in responding to modern challenges.

This testimony urges the House Education Committee to expand funding for SRO programs across all school levels—elementary, middle, and high school—as well as across different school types and geographic settings, including urban, suburban, rural, private, and parochial schools. By ensuring that every school has access to SROs, we can create safer learning environments and protect the future of our students.

Introduction

Chairperson and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on a matter of critical importance—the role of School Resource Officers (SROs) in ensuring the safety and well-being of our students, teachers, and staff.

My name is Officer Kevin Mengel, and I serve as the School Resource Officer (SRO) for the Spring Grove Area School District. I have the privilege of working with students, staff, and the community to ensure a safe, supportive learning environment. As both a law enforcement officer and a mentor, my role allows me to provide immediate protection while also building relationships with students that foster trust and open communication.

The Northern York County Regional Police Department (NYCRPD) has long recognized the importance of school safety and established its SRO program to meet the growing challenges facing schools. Our department has been actively involved in school safety initiatives for nearly two decades. Currently we have two SROs in the Spring Grove School District, two in the Dover Area School District, and one SRO in the Lincoln Intermediate Unit's York Learning Center. As an SRO, I am proud to be part of a program that has evolved to address the complex threats that schools face today, from physical security concerns to the mental and emotional well-being of students.

School Resource Officers are law enforcement professionals who play a unique and indispensable role in our schools. They not only act as a first line of defense in emergencies but also serve as mentors, educators, and trusted members of the school community. Over the past two decades, we have witnessed a profound shift in the challenges faced by schools—changes in security measures, the introduction of new threats like cyberbullying and online radicalization, and the need for quicker, more effective responses to emergencies. This testimony will address the following key points:

- The types of schools that benefit most from an SRO presence.
- The superiority of on-site SRO response times compared to officers on patrol.
- How school safety measures, including security technology, have evolved over the past 20 years.
- The growing complexity of threats to school environments and how SROs help mitigate these risks.

The Critical Role of School Resource Officers

School Resource Officers serve as a visible, reassuring presence within our educational institutions. Their role is multifaceted, encompassing law enforcement, crisis management, education, and community engagement. The presence of SROs in schools is increasingly recognized as one of the most effective means of ensuring safety.

Law Enforcement and Crisis Response

The primary duty of an SRO is to protect students and staff from any immediate danger. Whether the threat is internal—such as an altercation between students—or external, like an armed intruder, an SRO’s rapid response can prevent escalation and minimize harm. In active shooter situations, the presence of an armed, trained officer on-site ensures that law enforcement action begins the moment the threat emerges, rather than waiting for external police units to arrive. This immediacy has proven to be life-saving in multiple instances.

A less visible but equally important role of SROs is crisis prevention. Their ability to intervene in early stages—whether it’s recognizing signs of a student in distress or identifying potential security risks—allows schools to act preemptively rather than reactively.

Education and Mentorship

SROs often serve as informal educators, providing students with critical knowledge on a range of safety topics. Whether it’s educating students about the dangers of drug use, raising awareness about the consequences of bullying, or guiding them on the responsible use of social media, the presence of SROs helps build a safer, more responsible school culture.

Moreover, many students come to view their SRO as a trusted adult with whom they can confide in, whether they’re dealing with issues at home, peer conflict, or mental health concerns. SROs are often the first to notice when a student is struggling, and they can work closely with school counselors, administrators, and families to get students the help they need.

Community Engagement

School Resource Officers also bridge the gap between law enforcement and the community. Through their daily interactions with students and staff, they help dispel the often negative or fearful perceptions of police officers. By fostering trust and respect, SROs contribute to a positive school environment and encourage students to take ownership of their school’s safety.

What Types of Schools Benefit Most from School Resource Officers?

School Resource Officers (SROs) play a crucial role in a wide range of educational environments, from public to private institutions, at every educational level. However, the challenges faced by schools can vary depending on their location, whether urban, suburban, or rural. While the role of the SRO remains vital across these settings, the specific needs, risks, and vulnerabilities differ, and SROs must adapt their approach accordingly. Below, we explore the unique challenges faced by various types of schools and how SROs provide essential services tailored to their environments.

Specific challenges and needs by location

Urban Schools: Managing Higher Threat Levels and Complex Social Dynamics

Urban schools, particularly those in densely populated cities, often contend with elevated safety concerns due to their location within areas of higher crime rates, increased gang activity, and more frequent incidents of violence. These schools tend to have large student populations, making them more difficult to manage and more prone to social conflict. Additionally, urban schools may face

external threats from the surrounding community, including trespassers, drug activity, and even acts of violence unrelated to the school.

The presence of an SRO in urban schools is vital for several reasons:

Crime Prevention and Conflict Management: Urban schools are often at a higher risk of gang-related activities and violent confrontations. SROs work closely with students, staff, and community leaders to reduce the likelihood of violence. They are also trained to de-escalate conflicts, which is especially important in environments where tensions may run high.

Rapid Response to External Threats: In urban settings, schools can be exposed to external risks such as criminal activity or even stray violence from nearby incidents. Having an SRO on-site ensures a fast, effective response to external threats, offering protection to students and staff who may be vulnerable to nearby criminal activity.

Building Trust with Students: In many urban areas, the relationship between law enforcement and the community can be strained. SROs help bridge that gap by developing positive, respectful relationships with students, teaching them about the importance of law and order while dispelling negative perceptions of police officers.

Collaboration with Community Services: SROs in urban schools often collaborate with local law enforcement agencies and community services to address broader issues like drug prevention, mental health resources, and truancy. Their involvement in the broader community helps improve not just school safety but also the safety of neighborhoods.

Suburban Schools: Addressing New Security Threats and Expanding Populations

Suburban schools often sit at the intersection between urban and rural challenges, and their security needs are equally complex. While suburban schools tend to be located in lower-crime areas, they are not immune to violence, bullying, or external threats, especially as suburban populations have increased in recent years. Suburban schools can face challenges ranging from isolated instances of serious violence to issues like drug use, cyberbullying, and mental health crises among students.

In suburban settings, the role of the SRO includes:

Preventing Targeted Violence: Many suburban schools have experienced targeted acts of violence, such as school shootings. These schools, often perceived as safe, can be vulnerable to attacks from both external intruders and troubled students. SROs are critical in these environments, providing on-the-ground, rapid response in case of an emergency, and deterring violence through their presence and intervention.

Mitigating Cyberbullying and Social Media Threats: Suburban schools often face challenges related to cyberbullying, social media threats, and online harassment. As students increasingly use technology, SROs can help monitor online activities, educate students about the consequences of cyberbullying, and work with IT staff to mitigate online threats.

Handling Growing Student Populations: Many suburban districts have seen significant growth in recent years, leading to larger schools and stretched resources. SROs help manage safety for these

expanding populations, coordinating with school administrators to maintain order and ensure that safety protocols keep pace with the increased number of students and staff.

Fostering a Positive School Climate: Suburban students often face pressures related to academic performance, extracurricular commitments, and social dynamics. SROs play a key role in mentoring students, providing guidance on dealing with stress and conflict, and contributing to a safer, more supportive school environment.

Rural Schools: Overcoming Isolation and Limited Resources

Rural schools face unique challenges that differ from their urban and suburban counterparts. These schools are often smaller, geographically isolated, and have fewer law enforcement resources readily available. Response times from external agencies in rural areas are typically much slower, making the role of an on-site SRO even more critical. Additionally, rural schools may face issues like lack of mental health services, increased instances of substance abuse, and threats from individuals outside the school community.

SROs in rural schools provide key benefits, including:

Immediate Crisis Response: In rural areas, local police or emergency services may be miles away, leading to longer response times in the event of an emergency. An SRO on-site can provide immediate intervention in cases of violence, medical emergencies, or natural disasters, buying valuable time until additional help arrives.

Addressing Substance Abuse: Many rural schools are impacted by the opioid crisis and other forms of substance abuse, particularly in communities where jobs and resources are scarce. SROs can help identify students at risk, intervene in cases of substance abuse, and provide education and resources to help students avoid drug use.

Combating Isolation and External Threats: Because rural schools are often located in isolated areas, they are more vulnerable to external threats, including vandalism, theft, or targeted violence. Rural schools may have less robust security infrastructure, making the presence of an SRO all the more important for securing the premises and ensuring student safety.

Building Relationships in Tight-Knit Communities: In rural areas, where communities are often smaller and more interconnected, SROs are uniquely positioned to build strong relationships with students, staff, and families. These close-knit relationships enable SROs to quickly identify and address potential issues, ensuring a proactive approach to maintaining school safety.

Specific needs and challenges by grade level

High Schools: A Focus on Crime Prevention and Crisis Response

Public high schools typically deal with large, diverse student populations and complex social dynamics, leading to a higher likelihood of issues such as drug use, bullying, or violence. High schools are also more vulnerable to external threats like intruders or organized acts of violence.

SROs in public high schools provide a critical layer of security, with their presence acting as both a deterrent and an immediate responder to crises.

However, private and parochial high schools are not immune to similar threats. While these schools may have smaller student populations, the risks are still present. In fact, because of smaller student-to-staff ratios, these schools may be even more reliant on an SRO for handling emergencies. Private high schools often have open campuses, which can increase their vulnerability to external threats, making the need for on-site security just as crucial as in public schools. Parochial schools, which may be perceived as softer targets due to religious affiliations, can particularly benefit from having SROs to address any security risks specific to their community.

Middle Schools: Early Intervention and Relationship Building

Middle school is a critical period for emotional, social, and academic development. Bullying, peer pressure, and mental health challenges are common, and an SRO can make a significant difference in managing these issues. Middle school SROs play a proactive role in conflict resolution, early identification of at-risk students, and ensuring that behavioral issues do not escalate into more serious concerns.

In private and parochial middle schools, the intimate setting often allows for closer relationships between students and staff, but these schools may not have the full range of security resources available in public institutions. SROs provide added expertise in crisis management, security, and behavioral intervention that may be lacking otherwise. Additionally, SROs in these settings can offer guidance tailored to the specific values or missions of the school, whether religious or secular.

Elementary Schools: Safeguarding Vulnerable Populations

While younger children are less likely to engage in criminal behavior, elementary schools—public, private, and parochial—still face the possibility of external threats such as intruders or targeted violence. The presence of an SRO in elementary schools ensures a rapid response to any potential danger. Elementary students are also highly impressionable, and positive interactions with law enforcement at this stage can foster a sense of security and trust.

For private and parochial elementary schools, especially those in suburban or rural areas, the immediate presence of an SRO can be a significant asset in providing peace of mind to parents, staff, and the broader community. These schools may have less access to the resources and infrastructure available to public schools, such as advanced security systems or large administrative staff. An SRO helps fill those gaps, offering expertise in both prevention and response to any potential crisis.

Parochial and Private Schools: Unique Security Challenges

Parochial and private schools, while generally perceived as safer environments due to smaller class sizes and controlled admission, face unique security challenges that underscore the importance of having SROs on-site. These schools, often tied to religious or other institutional affiliations, may be seen as targets for ideologically motivated violence. For example, parochial schools associated with specific religious traditions could attract unwanted attention from individuals seeking to cause

harm due to those associations. Additionally, private schools often serve affluent communities, potentially making them a target for theft, trespassing, or other criminal activities.

The SRO's role in these schools goes beyond emergency response; they work closely with administration to assess risks that are unique to the school's demographic and location. SROs are trained to customize safety protocols that align with the school's specific needs, whether that involves managing large gatherings for religious services at parochial schools or securing expansive campuses in private institutions.

Moreover, many private and parochial schools place a high value on community involvement and moral development. SROs fit seamlessly into these environments, where their mentorship roles can be framed within the ethical or religious mission of the school, making them trusted figures who model respect, responsibility, and good citizenship.

Charter Schools: Flexibility and Security Needs

Charter schools often vary in size, location, and educational focus, but they share a common need for safety and security. In many cases, charter schools may operate in older buildings or rented spaces that lack the structural security measures present in modern public schools. This makes the presence of an SRO even more important. In addition to responding to physical security concerns, SROs can help these schools develop safety plans that take into account their unique facilities, student demographics, and community environment.

Across all school types—whether public, private, parochial, or charter—the presence of a School Resource Officer offers unparalleled advantages in terms of both safety and community building. The size, structure, and demographics of a school may differ, but the importance of a trained law

Response Time: The Critical Advantage of On-Site SROs

Perhaps the most compelling argument for SROs is their ability to respond immediately to emergencies. In situations where every second counts, waiting for an officer to arrive from outside the school can mean the difference between life and death.

Immediate Action in Emergencies

SROs are already on-site, patrolling school grounds, and are able to spring into action the moment a threat is identified. Whether it's an active shooter situation, a medical emergency, or a fight between students, the ability to take immediate action reduces response times drastically. External patrol officers, by contrast, must travel to the scene, navigate the school layout, and assess the situation—all of which takes precious time.

Knowledge of School Layout and Procedures

One of the key advantages of having a dedicated SRO is their intimate knowledge of the school's layout, safety protocols, and emergency procedures. This familiarity allows them to respond faster and more effectively than an external officer. An SRO knows the best exit routes, the location of security cameras, and the key access points for emergency personnel. In contrast, a patrol officer arriving from outside may struggle to find their way through the building or communicate effectively with staff in a crisis.

Coordination with School Staff and Emergency Services

SROs work closely with school administrators and staff on a daily basis. This close coordination means that in the event of an emergency, there is already a clear chain of command and communication in place. The SRO knows who to contact, what steps to take, and how to manage the flow of information between the school and emergency services. This level of preparedness is simply not possible for patrol officers who do not have regular contact with the school.

How School Safety Has Evolved Over the Past 20 Years

Over the past two decades, school safety measures have transformed dramatically in response to emerging threats. From the Columbine High School shooting in 1999 to the more recent tragedies at Sandy Hook, Parkland, and Uvalde, schools have been forced to adopt increasingly sophisticated security protocols. Alongside these changes, the role of SROs has evolved from reactive law enforcement to proactive, multi-faceted security professionals.

Improvements in Physical Security

Enhanced Surveillance Systems: Schools today are equipped with advanced video surveillance systems that allow administrators and law enforcement to monitor school grounds in real-time. While this technology is valuable for identifying potential threats, it is only fully effective when paired with on-site personnel—such as an SRO—who can respond immediately when an issue is detected.

Advanced Locking Mechanisms: Many schools have upgraded their physical security with electronic locks, access control systems, and panic buttons. These systems can be remotely activated in the event of an emergency, locking down the entire school to prevent an intruder from moving between rooms. While these measures are highly effective in securing the building, the presence of an SRO is still crucial for assessing and neutralizing a threat.

Reinforced Building Design: Some newer schools are being constructed with reinforced doors, bullet-resistant glass, and more secure entryways. Older schools are retrofitting their facilities to meet new safety standards. While these structural improvements provide an added layer of protection, they must be supplemented by trained personnel who can manage the human elements of a crisis.

Emergence of New Threats

Increased Access to Weapons: One of the most alarming trends in recent years is the increased accessibility of firearms and other weapons, particularly for students. While stringent laws and security measures have been implemented to keep weapons out of schools, incidents involving guns brought onto school grounds have become disturbingly common. SROs are trained to identify students who may be carrying weapons and to intervene before they can cause harm.

Cyberbullying and Online Radicalization: The advent of the internet and social media has introduced new forms of harassment, including cyberbullying, which can have devastating consequences for students' mental health and well-being. In extreme cases, online radicalization

has led students to plan and carry out violent acts on school grounds. SROs are trained to recognize these signs, work with school IT departments to investigate online threats, and intervene before incidents escalate.

Mental Health Crises: Over the last 20 years, there has been a significant increase in students experiencing mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. SROs play an essential role in recognizing students in crisis, coordinating with mental health professionals, and ensuring that students receive the help they need. In many cases, SROs have saved lives by identifying students at risk of harming themselves or others and intervening early.

Conclusion

In conclusion, School Resource Officers are an indispensable part of our school safety strategy. They are not just law enforcement officers—they are mentors, educators, crisis responders, and key members of the school community. In a world where school safety challenges continue to evolve, SROs offer a proven, adaptable, and effective solution.

Across all school types—whether public, private, parochial, or charter—the presence of a School Resource Officer offers unparalleled advantages in terms of both safety and community building. The size, structure, and demographics of a school may differ, but the importance of a trained law enforcement officer on-site to respond to emergencies, deter crime, and mentor students remains constant.

By ensuring that every school, regardless of its type, has access to an SRO, we can provide students and staff with a safer, more secure learning environment. I strongly encourage this legislature to expand support for SRO programs in all educational settings throughout Pennsylvania.

The immediacy of their response in emergencies, combined with their ability to build relationships with students and staff, positions SROs as a critical line of defense in safeguarding our schools. All schools—whether elementary, middle, or high—can benefit from the presence of an SRO, and their importance cannot be overstated.

As we continue to invest in the future of our education system, we must prioritize the safety of our students and staff by ensuring that every school has access to the protection and resources they need. I strongly urge this legislature to support expanded funding for SRO programs, ensuring that no Pennsylvania school is left unprotected.

Thank you for your time, and I am happy to answer any questions.

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