

# POUDRE SCHOOL DISTRICT SRO COMMUNITY ADVISORY COUNCIL INTERVIEW SUMMARY

PREPARED BY MARISOL RODRIGUEZ

OCTOBER 14, 2010

## Vision and Big Picture

When asked about their vision for **school safety**, Council members talked about physical safety and psychological safety. Physically, interviewees described an environment safe from active shooters, from bullying and fights, bomb threats, threatening behavior, drug use, etc. They also described infrastructure safety - lights, camera, bullet proof glass, and metal detectors.

When discussing psychological safety, interviewees talked about undocumented students feeling safe that they won't be deported or profiled, BIPOC students not feeling discriminated against or targeted, LGBTQ students feeling free to express themselves without fear of harm or retribution.

Interviewees also mentioned social emotional learning and being able to respond and address children with special education needs, dealing with trauma, or other personality traits that may need to be addressed differently than a typically developing student. Basically, safety means feeling as though students are able to learn and adults are able to teach and lead without being distracted by fears of being harmed physically, emotionally, or psychologically. Where kids are treated like kids "and not like criminals." Where students are offered spaces to laugh and be themselves.

## School Resource Officers (SROs)

Two themes emerged when asked **what SROs do well and what a proper role** for SROs is. The first is around relationship building. For many, SROs have done a good job at building relationships inside their respective school, with students, parents, and community. They serve as someone who is able to intervene, often before a crisis happens. The second thing SROs do well is serve as someone who is trained with a firearm who can be there in case of an emergency, giving many a sense of safety and security. Some Council members see them as someone who is on call and can get information and support quickly as things are happening. One person stated "SROs are certainly there for security - but they are really more there in a mentoring role with a very strong realization that they are, for many of the students, the first interaction with a police officer and they want it to be positive. They don't want kids to be afraid of the police, want them to understand law enforcement is there to help and protect them."

A couple Council members stated that what they believe SROs do well (relationship building and trainings) are better suited to be done by someone who is not in law enforcement. Another perspective was that SROs, given their training as law enforcement and their armed position, continue to “normalize the power of a system that has a history rooted in oppression and enslavement.” Understanding the history of why SROs are in schools and what problems the SRO model is trying to address will be important to analyze because “discipline practices in schools mirrors a punitive relationship that we have in our society, instead of focusing on strengths and mental health.”

Most Council members agree that SROs can have a positive role at the schools, and many would like them to continue to have a role. However, almost everyone interviewed stated that there needs to be increased clarity about the role and scope of each SRO from the district, not left up to individual schools. What is in or out of scope of SROs needs greater clarity in the opinion of almost every Council member.

Conversely, Council members were asked about what **SROs need to improve on and things that should be outside their scope**. Knowing their role was the most cited answer. This came across in many ways from being too involved, to overstepping in some situations, to dictating when drills happen. Overall there was a feeling that no one is clear on what is inside or outside the scope of an SRO. Many also questioned the selection process, noting a need for psychological testing, for the school district and the police department to come together to do the selection. One person also suggested a cost/benefit analysis occur to determine if PSD was “getting its moneys worth.”

Things mentioned that should be outside of an SROs scope include:

- If a student does do something out of line then there should be an outside police officer who makes the arrest, not the SRO
- Ticketing students
- Taking the place of a teacher for minor disciplinary problems

There were mixed opinions on whether SROs should be a resource or give trainings/classes on safety topics. Some Council members agreed that, while talk about cyber bullying and being safe online are important, it doesn't feel like the right role for SROs. While others thought SROs could serve as more of a resource to students on topics like social media safety, interpersonal violence at home or at school - helping students navigate difficult situations as a resource and safe space.

The **biggest concerns** about SROs are around their role in schools. From weapons to responding to minor discipline issues, Council members generally have concerns of what is in the scope for an SRO. Numerous Council members have strong concerns that SROs carry weapons and see no reason for SROs to do so. Others worry that SROs are not deeply trained in de-escalation techniques and their involvement actually escalates what could be minor situations. There are concerns about how SROs are hired and who has ultimate authority in a school building. Finally, there is a general sense that teachers and administrators are relying on SROs to do things that they should be doing (i.e. interacting with students in crisis,

handling mental health issues, dealing with minor behavior issues, etc.) and unnecessarily entangling K-12 students with the criminal justice systems. Other concerns about SROs include:

- Getting our money's worth and getting a great benefit for our students
- Becoming too militant in our responses
- Unnecessary exposure to police at such a young age
- The fear that the simple presence of a police officer has on certain populations of students and parents
- Reaffirming the belief that safety in society is created by police rather than through community relationships

Two Council members have no concerns about SROs as they are vetted by the school district and law enforcement and one noted their only concern was not having enough of them.

Most Council members have little to no knowledge of **what other school districts are doing** in this area. A few mentioned knowing of Denver Public School's recent decision to no longer use SROs, but questions remained about what this meant and what the SRO model would be replaced with. Some ideas/thoughts regarding what else could be done included:

- Private security guards
- Having our own security force
- Diversion programming
- Retired police officers (who are unarmed)
- More Restorative Justice and mindfulness practices, education, and people
- Increasing the counselor per student ratio
- Community-based response (i.e. Portland, OR model)
- Simply calling the police when they are needed
- Bullet-proof glass and retrofitting doors
- Building evacuation and reunification plans that are shared with parents
- Training of teachers and administrators in trauma and mental health

## Tradeoffs and Considerations

Council members were asked about the tradeoffs of having or not having SROs in schools. The most common response to **what would be gained** if SROs were no longer in the schools was that some students and parents who have an adverse reaction to seeing police, namely from marginalized communities who often have had generations of negative police experiences, would have "peace of mind", decreased anxiety, and increased mental health. One Council member stated "There is a relationship the communities of color who have expressed directly the pain that SROs have brought to the lives of their kids and youth and their relationship with those communities and whether or not they see the school district as a partner who will truly honor their experiences or if the district will continue to perpetuate systems of white supremacy. This relationship is at stake." Council members also mentioned the following benefits of not having SROs in schools:

- Free up 14 police officers who could help with traffic and speeding issues
- Fewer drills (i.e. active shooter drills)

- Transferring discipline back to teachers and administrators
- Fewer criminal chargers, student who make bad decisions get more support and help before ticketed or charged (especially for students with IEPs who make up a larger percentage of those arrested)
- Fewer expulsions
- More financial resources to take a programming and systems approach

A few Council members could not name any benefits of completely removing SROs and believe that the current call for SRO removal is a “knee jerk” reaction to not wanting police involved given the societal unrest that is occurring currently.

Conversely, Council members were also asked about the **potential risks or losses** if SROs leave the schools. Concerns fell into the following categories:

- **RELATIONSHIPS:** good SROs have positive relationships/interactions with students; SROs know individual students and use that relationship when students are in trouble; SROs have prevented more serious issues because of their relationship and lines of communication with students and families (early intervention); SROs have a vested interest in their school; SROs can handle situations (restraining parents or students) that I would have to call the police for and who would likely not handle as effectively;
- **DISCIPLINE:** teachers and administrators will spend a disproportionate amount of time handling behaviors instead of teaching; presence of a uniformed officer helps keep some things under control;
- **SENSE OF SECURITY:** being in Colorado there is real fear about school shootings; lose a sense of security; teachers and administrators would feel less safe; concerns about irate parents;
- **DIRECT COMMUNICATION:** SROs have a direct line of communication to the police; increase in wait time if there was an emergency instead of someone being on campus;
- **COMMUNITY RESPONSE:** create rifts within the community and politicize the issue; certain communities may withdraw and put their student in a private or charter school; may be incidents where some people feel a situation would have been better served by an SRO which creates blowbacks to the district.

One person stated that they didn’t see any risks as there will still be some sort of security in the school and they are scared of police officers.

## Successful Process

When asked about **success at the end of this process**, the majority of Council members desire a process where everyone feels heard, consensus is reached, and that they have made a difference. A process that ends with the school board adopting their recommendations, and not pushing them aside. One where the Council has reached good, logical, well thought out reasons to either keep the SRO or to do away with them. Council members want a legitimate, productive process where the members come together as a group, sharing and learning from each other, are challenged and ultimately learn and expand their own world view. Some also expressed a desire to help clearly define the scope of SROs and better

standard operating procedures to ensure the communities' concerns are addressed. Most agreed that in the end, it is the school board's decision what to do with their recommendation(s).

Generally Council members want a **facilitator** who can do the following:

- Has a clear, full picture, not only how it looks at each school but also the opinions and perspectives of each of us.
- Understands the historical context of why SROs were created, is highly educated on the entire SRO system, and knows some of the data behind SROs.
- Is able to be balanced on the issue at hand and see both sides of it.
- Is able to move a group and process forward with a lot of divergent views ensuring all voices are heard.
- Has the ability to push back on some of the facts/data/narrative if those are wrong.
- Has the capacity to build trust and a process that facilitates trust and a transformative conversation.
- Has a strong social justice analysis and the ability to notice power dynamics and intervene so we can have equitable conversations.

Most Council members noted some **training or information** they think would be important for the group to have. This included:

- This history on why SROs are currently being used
- Case studies and literature reviews
- SRO policies, contract, operating procedures, responsibilities
- Background of the inner workings of how someone becomes an SRO
- School to prison pipeline data
- Information on what other districts are doing successfully
- PSD data
- Group decision making, success criteria, group norms
- Anti-oppressive and anti-racist training

It was obvious that Council members want to **ensure a variety of voices are heard** in this process. Many Council members did not know who was on the Council already and thus mentioned representatives that are on the council already (school district representatives, students, community members, police, etc.). Others, not currently represented on the Council mentioned were:

- Psychologist/mental health specialists - help us see how students think but also to keep an eye on us to make sure someone isn't just being adversarial.
- Other districts - to learn what they are doing
- Teachers - to understand what they deal with every day and how changes would affect them
- SROs
- CSU leadership students - even the athletics department
- All the subgroups of students (foster care, mental illness, undocumented, BIPOC, LGBTQ, SPED)
- Child Trauma and Resilience Assessment Center at CSU
- Social workers - who operate from a social justice lens

- La Cocina - serves undocumented persons
- Unrepresented groups we are hearing from, those who aren't seen and may be discriminated or biased against

## Logistics

Everyone on the Council would be able to meet if it was solely online, and expressed an interest to meet in person, despite COVID. However, many noted logistical and health concerns about meeting in person and wanted to be respectful of all members should any be at high risk or unable to meet in person. All preferred email or text as ways of communicating and the only limitations to serving would be around scheduling during the daytime/school hours.