

Legislatures Address Police in Schools

BY BENJAMIN OLNECK-BROWN

Nationwide protests concerning racial injustice and police misconduct have prompted legislators and other policymakers to consider the role of law enforcement in U.S. schools. States and school districts are considering whether to retain, alter or expand school resource officer (SRO) programs and how to implement best practices for those officers. They are also seeking to balance the need for school safety with concerns about the “school to prison pipeline,”—the connection between disciplinary measures in school and students’ interaction with the criminal justice system.

SRO programs proliferated in the 1990s and 2000s in response to rising concerns about school safety and high-profile instances of gun violence in schools. [Some argue](#) that SRO programs should be replaced because they contribute to the high arrest and incarceration rates of students of color and students with disabilities. [Others](#) point to the ability of SROs to prevent violence and develop relationships with students as reasons to encourage their presence in schools. Overall, [research indicates](#) that students, parents, teachers and administrators are supportive of SRO programs, though support varies based on survey respondents’ interactions with and perceptions of police officers.

Evidence about the impact of SROs on student arrests and school violence is mixed. The National Police Foundation has compiled [reports](#) indicating that SROs can help avert serious incidents of school violence. Since their peak in the mid-1990s, [juvenile arrest rates](#) have steadily declined, even as the presence of police in schools has grown. A 2009 [study](#) found that schools with SROs had higher student arrest rates than schools without SROs. Controlling for the economic conditions of the school, this study found that having an SRO predicted a higher arrest rate for disorderly conduct and a lower arrest rate for assault and weapons charges. Overall, [data from the U.S. Department of Education](#) indicates significant racial disparities in school-based [arrests](#), [discipline](#) and [referrals](#) to the criminal justice system.

In recent months, [some school districts have voted](#) to remove SROs from their schools. No state has taken or considered such an action,



but states play an important role in determining SRO training requirements, roles and responsibilities.

The [National Association of School Resource Officers’](#) (NASRO) standards and best practices recommend that SROs undergo specialized training in areas including student mental health and adolescent development to inform their interactions with students. At least 27 states require or offer incentives for specialized training for school resource officers. For example:

- [Illinois](#) requires training in child and adolescent development and psychology, positive behavioral interventions and support, conflict resolution techniques and restorative justice techniques.
- [Alabama](#) requires that SROs undergo active shooter training and training in use of a non-lethal weapon.
- [Nebraska](#) requires at least 20 hours of training for SROs. Topics include school law, student rights, special needs students, conflict de-escalation, SRO ethics, teen brain development, adolescent behavior, implicit bias, diversity and cultural awareness, trauma-informed responses and violence prevention.
- [Rhode Island](#) offers certification for officers who complete specialized training.

Recent legislation has sought to strengthen training standards for SROs, increase state-level review of SRO roles or modify SRO responsibilities relating to student discipline. For example, a [bill](#) passed in Virginia requires more frequent state review and conspicuous publishing of memoranda of understanding (MOU) between school boards and local law enforcement agencies. Another Virginia [bill](#) requires SROs and school security officers to receive specified training, including in mediation and conflict resolution, security awareness in the school environment, and relevant laws and liability issues specific to working with students.

School districts can use MOUs to specify financial arrangements with a local law enforcement agency, SRO selection and supervision processes, SRO training requirements, information sharing and privacy agreements, and other important practices for SROs. At least 11 states provide model MOUs or require districts that use SROs to establish MOUs with law enforcement agencies. For example, [New Jersey](#) provides schools with a uniform memorandum that addresses arrests, searches and other SRO actions. [Nebraska](#) recently adopted legislation requiring school districts to adopt a model MOU developed by the state Department of Education or a “substantially similar” memorandum.

Whether through training requirements, memoranda of understanding, or oversight, state legislatures continue to address the role that law enforcement plays in local schools. NCSL tracks legislation and research connected to this important issue on its [school safety webpage](#).

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