

U.S. Department of Education Guiding Principles: A Summary for School Resource Officers

On January 9, 2014 the U.S. Department of Education, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Justice, issued Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline.¹ This Resource Guide (“the Guide”) provides guidance on creating safe schools where effective teaching and learning can take place without involvement of law enforcement officers or reliance on referrals to the juvenile justice system.

For schools that partner with local law enforcement agencies to maintain safe environments, the federal government articulated three key elements of an effective collaboration:

1. Clarity about the role of law enforcement officers in public schools,
2. Agreement among school and agency officials on the limits and boundaries of police officers’ role,
3. Rigorous, repeated and routine training for School Resource Officers (SROs).

Roles and Responsibilities

- Law enforcement officers should focus on assuring the safety of the school community by addressing and preventing serious, real and immediate threats to the physical safety of the school and the wider community.
- School administrators should ensure that school-based law enforcement officers (School Resource Officers or SROs) do not become involved in routine disciplinary matters.

Written Agreements/Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) between Schools and Law Enforcement Agencies

These agreements should:

- Articulate the limits of officer’s role
- Be provided in publicly available form
- Clarify that student conduct and incidents generally not meeting the definition of an immediate threat to school safety -- such as tardiness, loitering, use of profanity, dress code violations and disruptive or disrespectful behaviors -- should be excluded from the scope of police officers’ responsibilities
- Emphasize that law enforcement approaches such as arrest, citation, ticketing or court referrals are to be used only as a last resort and should never be used to address instances of non-violent misbehavior that do not pose a serious and

¹ All information is from the U.S. Department of Education Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline, Washington, DC, January 2014. This 27-page document is in the public domain and available on the Department’s website at www.ed.gov/school-discipline

immediate threat to school safety.

Training:

SROs should receive rigorous training before they are assigned to work on a school campus. Training should be repeated and be updated regularly. It should be conducted jointly with school administrators and other school staff including mental health professionals. Training curriculum should include:

- o The proper role and responsibilities of officers, consistent with the school's written policies or MOU
- o The differences between disciplinary infractions appropriately handled by school officials, on one hand, and threats to safety or serious criminal conduct requiring law enforcement involvement, on the other
- o Child and adolescent development and age-appropriate responses to misbehavior that emphasize de-escalation techniques and conflict resolution and make use of restorative justice practices
- o Clear guidance on how to engage students, promote positive behavior and respond appropriately when students misbehave
- o Behaviors exhibited by youth who have experienced or been exposed to trauma and violence and best practices for identifying such students and referring them to appropriate services
- o Explanations of learning, emotional and behavioral disabilities and of the legal protections for youth entitled to special education services
- o Principles of bias-free policing, including implicit or unconscious bias and cultural competence
- o The negative collateral consequences associated with youth involvement in the juvenile and criminal justice system and the importance of preventing and reducing such involvement through use of alternative strategies, such as referral to local programs, including mental health services.

Continuous Monitoring of the School and Agency Activities Through Regular Data Collection and Evaluation

A key and explicit expectation of the Resource Guide is that data on the actions of SROs be collected and made publicly available. The Guide notes that schools and law enforcement agencies are well-served by:

- Comprehensive data collection on officer activity, including, as appropriate, data on school-based arrests, citations, searches and referrals to other agencies,
- Close monitoring of officers to ensure that their activity meets the school's safety goals and does not have any unintended negative consequences,
- Public reporting of disaggregated data on these activities, consistent with applicable federal, state and local privacy laws.

Complaint Handling: In addition, the Guide strongly recommends that school administrators develop a complaint handling and resolution process that allows students and community members to raise concerns about officers' activities and have them addressed promptly.

www.strategiesforyouth.org

Prepared For Strategies for Youth by Carole James