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Changing the Paradigm for School Safety

The School Safety and Security Specialist

by Lisa H. Thurau and Jim Golden*

It is frequently noted that middle ground is increasingly hard to find these days. This is particularly true in the emotionally charged debates about how to keep schools safe.

On one side are those who argue that school police—or School Resource Officers (SROs)—are necessary to keep students and staff safe, particularly from the horrific shootings that have become altogether too commonplace.

On the other side are those who maintain—borne out by data—that placing police in schools increases the number of students who are arrested, often for relatively minor misbehaviors that should be handled by the school. National data indicate that students of color and students with disabilities are disproportionately represented among those subjected to school-based arrests, putting them at

greater risk of dropping out of school and becoming system-involved.

While the middle ground may be difficult to locate in many public policy debates, it is in plain sight with respect to safe schools: School Safety and Security Specialists (“Specialists”) combine the best attributes of the SRO approach without the well-documented weaknesses. During a *Policing the Teen Brain in School* training we recently facilitated for the Columbus, Ohio public school system, we saw the significant differences in orientation, training, and experience between SROs and Specialists.


The deep knowledge of students held by Specialists makes them a good answer to the current questions facing those charged with school safety.

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There Is No “SRO” Model: Every Situation Is Different

Although police have been deployed in schools in record numbers since the 1990s, the ways in which they work in schools differ dramatically from district to district, even from school to school. In most cases, SROs are sworn officers of municipal police departments or sheriff’s offices. They are assigned the “beat” of a school.

The way in which SROs interact with students, teachers, administrators, and other staff sometimes is determined by a Memorandum of Understanding (if one exists) between a law enforcement agency and the school district, as well as by the personalities of the SROs themselves. Most SROs are not obligated to be trained to work in schools and/or with youth, and they enjoy considerable autonomy to define the job as they see fit, and to designate what constitutes an arrestable offense, often with little guidance or oversight.

Over the last 20 years, studies have repeatedly demonstrated that the presence of SROs increases the number of student arrests and citations for “disorderly conduct,” “insubordination,” and other relatively minor offenses. The media frequently report stories of students led away in handcuffs for doodling on a desk, throwing spitballs during a school assembly, or getting into fights. Students of color and students with disabilities are often singled out for the harshest punishments. Despite a lack of evidence that the presence of SROs actually prevents school shootings, legislatures and school committees across the country have beefed up the number of police who are deployed in schools, often facing fierce opposition from children’s and youth advocates.

“Social First Responders” Who Don’t Wear a Uniform or Carry a Gun

The “School Safety and Security Specialist,” a term coined by Chris Ward, Director of Safety and Security at Columbus City Public Schools, describes professionals who, like SROs, work every day in schools and are charged with keeping everyone inside the building safe.

There are, however, critical differences between these professionals and SROs. For starters, Specialists are employees of the schools, not of law enforcement. They do not carry guns. In the Columbus Public Schools, many Specialists are former teachers, coaches, counselors, and

probation or detention officers. They know kids and they know them well.

They are “social first responders,” or, as one described it, “emotional fixers” who come to the emotional rescue. Specialists have seen every kind of youthful behavior and have developed thoughtful philosophies about how to read youth and understand the root causes of what troubles youth. Many of the Specialists live where the students live and see them in and out of school and around the neighborhood.

Specialists have thick skins and big hearts. They understand from experience and training what psychologists have learned from their research on youth: Behavior is a form of communication. To understand conduct, one must understand the underlying message that conduct is struggling

Specialists view themselves “as part of the community, with the duty to protect and keep that environment safe for everyone.”

Specialists are often contacted by administrators for help, to understand and “translate” students’ conduct. In Columbus they help bridge cultural, class, and gender divides between schools and the students they teach. Specialists are sought out by school administrators and teachers for insights into students and their families, consulted about providing special one-on-one attention for youth who pose the biggest behavioral challenges, and brought in to navigate interactions with parents. “These are our kids,” said one Specialist. “We know them and their families and communities.”

The Specialist model is the direction that schools should move toward. These

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to convey. Specialists represent a different kind of “community policing” and supervision within the school, one based on creating a community of support and a network of accountability.

The differences between the role of SROs and School Safety and Security Specialists are signified in the uniforms they wear. School Safety Specialists in Columbus wear blue golf shirts and plain dark trousers, in contrast to the full police uniforms worn by SROs. Specialists do not wear badges or carry guns.

Building Relationships, Not Just Enforcing Rules

We observed profound differences in the ways that SROs and Specialists approach their jobs. For example, SROs, owing to their law enforcement training, can more quickly and with less provocation fall into an “enforcement mode” than Specialists, who see their primary purpose as “the care and protection of children.”

Ward views Specialists’ chief goal as “building strong relationships” with students and has provided training for them to reflect this orientation. Specialists are taught about trauma, abuse, and the effects of poverty and violence on student behaviors. They receive instruction in restorative approaches and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS). Ward believes it is important that

Specialists can more easily adapt to the educational mission of a school than SROs can, and youth can often connect to them with less fear of being misunderstood and fewer legal consequences during interactions. With Specialists deployed on site, the armed law enforcement officer can remain on the perimeter of school campuses—available and ready when necessary, but not an integral part of the school-based support team.

For many, Specialists strike the right balance between keeping our schools safe and supporting our students, allowing schools to fulfill their mission to educate and nurture the next generation of citizens in a democratic society.

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