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VIA EMAIL

Barrington Town Council
283 County Road
Barrington, RI 02806

Dear Town Councilors:

This letter is on behalf of the Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education, the American Civil Liberties Union of Rhode Island, Providence Student Union, and Providence Student Youth Movement. Collectively our organizations write to urge the Town Council to reject the proposal to add a school resource officer to Barrington Middle School at its upcoming meeting. Our organizations have long opposed the addition of school resource officers in Rhode Island schools, and our concern is heightened by the Barrington School Committee's stated intention to additionally assign this officer to Barrington's elementary schools.

We recognize that this is probably first and foremost a fiscal, rather than policy, issue for the Council. On that level, we urge the Council – especially when added to the policy concerns expressed below – to reject the use of limited municipal funds for such a use when the money could be expended for much more productive purposes.

Some of us shared our perspective with the School Committee while they were considering this addition, and our concerns remain unchanged. As stated in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Barrington Police Department and the Barrington School District, school resource officers are first and foremost sworn police officers, operating under the police department, and not the school district. This distinction serves as a stark reminder that this person is not an educator or support staff, but a law enforcement officer. The presence of such personnel in the school setting can inappropriately redefine normal adolescent behaviors into issues of criminal justice.

We understand that the safety and support of students is paramount, but the presence of SROs offers a false sense of security without fundamentally addressing the root causes of school safety concerns. There is no evidence that school resource officers prevent school shootings, nor are they equipped to offer the social, emotional, and behavioral support that students need and that non-law enforcement school professionals could better provide. While we recognize that some SROs may establish good rapport with students, we firmly believe that students are better served by increased investment in more specialized personnel such as counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals, who are trained to provide that type of support to students.

Despite the fact that school resource officers are discouraged from acting as “school disciplinarians,” studies have shown that schools with school resource officers experience

increased suspensions, expulsions, police referrals, and student arrests.¹ These outcomes contribute directly to the school-to-prison pipeline and negatively impact educational outcomes. Our concern is compounded when one considers that students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students both statewide and nationally are disproportionately affected by these harmful disciplinary tactics.²

We are also concerned about changes to reporting requirements between the 2024 MOU and the one signed in 2025 and currently in place. The 2024 MOU required weekly activity reports from the SRO to both the Barrington Police Department and the school principal, including detailed information on arrests, police interactions, referrals to the school resource officer, and educational trainings. This weekly reporting is absent from the 2025 MOU. Notably missing as well is an explicit reference to the reporting requirement, under R.I.G.L. §16-2-17, of comprehensive data collection on the use of force against students, arrests and their justifications, referrals to law enforcement or court services, and other disciplinary actions involving students.

Instead, the 2025 MOU limits reporting obligations to the cost of the school resource officer, a description of the proposed mental, social, or emotional health support budget, and aggregate data on school-based arrests, citations, and court referrals. The added transparency that the data collection requirements missing from the 2025 MOU provide are vital to ensure that school resource officers are following their stated duties and not serving as “school disciplinarians.”

Like the Town Council and the School Committee, we want students to be safe and to thrive. While we respect the intent to protect students, we strongly disagree that the increased use of law enforcement is that right approach. True safety comes from investing in supportive, preventive resources designed to help students, not from increased policing.

Thank you for considering our perspective. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Chanda Womack

Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education

Steven Brown

American Civil Liberties Union of Rhode Island

Denezia Fahie

Providence Student Union

Vanessa Flores-Maldonado

Providence Youth Student Movement

¹ See, e.g., <https://studentsdemandaction.org/report/address-the-presence-of-school-resource-officers-in-your-school/>

² At the state level, see the ACLU’s March 2023 report, “Still Oversuspended and Underserved: Continued Disparities in Suspension Rates in Rhode Island.” <https://www.riaclu.org/publications/report-still-oversuspended-and-underserved-continued-disparities-suspension-rates-rhode/>