

May 1, 2023

Dear Members of the Barrington School Committee,

In the days following the tragic school shooting in Nashville, it was reported that your committee received a letter request to place a school resource officer (SRO) in every school in Barrington. As organizations dedicated to educational equity, and to ensuring that all students in Rhode Island are able to access safe and enriching academic opportunities, we write to you today to respectfully ask that you decline to take action on this request.

We are sensitive to the impetus behind this request, and similarly seek a future where the school environment does not carry the tacit threat of tragedy. But the reality also is that, for many students, police-focused approaches disrupt the educational atmosphere, fail to increase student safety, divert attention from the social and mental health resources that some students need, and encourage the school-to-prison pipeline.

SROs are, first and foremost, police officers. Even in the school setting, they are employed by and report to the police department, not the school, and this inevitably colors their activities. Our groups are all too aware of incidents where minor infractions of school rules, which in any other circumstance would be dealt with administratively, turn into arrests for open-ended crimes like disorderly conduct when an SRO is present. Neither the child nor the school is well served when a student's immature behavior is addressed by an official trained in criminality and arrest rather than getting to the root of a behavioral issue.

Further, while we don't mean to paint all SROs with a broad brush, one cannot ignore the publicly reported disturbing incidents of SRO misbehavior in Rhode Island that, while we know represent only a small fraction of questionable conduct by police in the school setting, exemplify the enhanced risk that the presence of SROs presents to unnecessarily introducing students to the criminal justice system.<sup>1</sup>

We also believe that focusing on the hiring of SROs provides a false sense of security without fundamentally addressing the legitimate fears about school violence. There is no proof that SROs reduce school shootings,<sup>2</sup> nor can they contribute the sorely needed social-emotional and behavioral support that more specialized personnel such as counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals are trained to provide. But, as suggested above, there is evidence that SROs increase "the use of suspensions, expulsions, police referrals, and arrests of students,"<sup>3</sup> which demonstrates an ongoing and tangible threat to student outcomes through overzealous

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., "Tiverton school resource officer charged with assault," Sarah Doiron, 3/3/2023, <https://www.wpri.com/news/local-news/east-bay/tiverton-school-resource-officer-charged-with-assault/>; "Narragansett School District settles suit over student's arrest," NBC-10 News, 4/3/2023, <https://turnto10.com/news/local/narragansett-school-district-lawsuit-settlement-american-civil-liberties-rhode-island-surveillance-video-damages>; "Tre'sur Johnson case to go forward," Miranda Nazarro, 7/14/2022, NBC-10 News, <https://turnto10.com/news/local/pawtucket-rhode-island-tresur-johnson-federal-judge-handcuff-arrest-american-civil-liberties-union-goff-middle-school-rationally-motivated-student-resource-officer-unconstitutional-court>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai21-476.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Id.

introduction to the school-to-prison pipeline. This concern is only compounded when we consider that BIPOC students, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students both statewide and nationally are disproportionately affected by these harmful disciplinary tactics.

In sum, while we respect and understand the desire to seek protection for students, we strongly disagree that the increased use of law enforcement – and the collateral consequences that its presence can bring – is the appropriate method for doing so. We agree with the letter writers that there are “reasonable, practical, and aesthetically pleasing ways to enhance security in our schools to raise campuses to contemporary standards while improving our children’s social and educational experiences.” Hiring more SROs, however, is simply not one of them.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,

Chanda Womack  
**Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education**

Hannah Stern  
**American Civil Liberties Union of Rhode Island**

Harrison Tuttle  
**Black Lives Matter RI PAC**

Ramona Santos Torres  
**Parents Leading for Educational Equity**

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**Providence Student Union**

Vanessa Flores-Maldonado  
**Providence Youth Student Movement**

Paige Clausius-Parks  
**Rhode Island KIDS COUNT**

Janie Seguí Rodríguez  
**Stop the Wait RI**

Peter Chung  
**Young Voices**

Rush Frazier  
**Youth Pride, Inc.**