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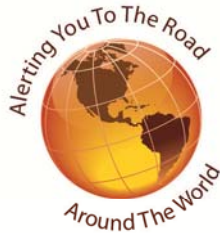
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Whaddayasay we start off 2012 with a controversial topic. How about...

School Police Forces; some things to consider.

Have you ever wondered why some school districts do not have a police force while other, sometimes much smaller districts, maintain their very own police departments. Let's explore some considerations for the creation and maintaining of a school police force.

Before we begin, and for argument's sake, let us concede two points. First, this summary is only the author's opinion of considerations necessary. There are no shortage of opinions and products to help keep schools safe or to improve their safety; each with their own associated cost. However, until the matter is vetted and approved by the governing school board, any thought to the matter is simply "thought" or "preplanning." Second, let us assume that the cost differences of a district's current security force would be equal, or only marginally different to, the maintenance of a police force. In other words, we will assume the cost of paying for School Resource Officers through mutual agreement(s) with a local law enforcement entity (or whatever security personnel are currently utilized) is roughly equal to the creation and maintenance of a district police force. That stated, let us begin with some considerations.

Is the system in place serving the needs of the school district?

Overall incidents of crime among juveniles appear to be trending downward. According to the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, [1.9 million minors were arrested in 2009](#). That number reflects a downward trend of 17 percent since 2000. Furthermore, the same DOJ report reflected the [2.3 million juvenile arrests in 2000](#)

marked a similar downward trend of 20 percent from 1996. Finally, since 2000, [juvenile arrests have also slightly declined as a percentage of total arrests](#), for both violent and property crime.

If these numbers are similarly reflected in your particular district, leadership may feel the security needs are being served adequately by current means without need for a police force. However, if the numbers for your district are trending in the opposite direction or, a particularly serious case stirs enough publicity, then the time to consider other options may be drawing near.

What other option might be considered?

Demanding staff be present during passing periods has been regularly overlooked. The practice seems to have paid-off in the author's district where teachers at one particular campus were previously noted by administrators to be absent during passing periods. The principal demanded the teachers be at the classroom door (and by default of location) engaging students during the passing periods. Although the outcome as reported by the principal appeared to be a successful reduction in hallway disruptions, the idea continues to be met with some resistance and requires a strong commitment on the part of the administrators.

Consider adding *mobile* high resolution cameras to areas that bring regular problems. Let's face it, the students (and employees) of today are a very techno-savvy bunch. Today, most schools have video security systems but students and employees learn very quickly where the cameras are located and, more importantly, where they are *not* located. A mobile security system may be a great deterrent if utilized properly because as everyone knows, pictures or videos are worth a thousand words and in some cases, a quick resolution to a problem.

Widen the gaze by reviewing processes and procedures for intra-district consistency in discipline. Many school districts experience growth, adding campuses and personnel but may fail to regularly ensure discipline issues are handled similarly from campus-to-campus. Too often, administration may focus on a particularly troublesome school without giving thought to a comparison of similar problems at other campuses. More importantly, be mindful that a cursory review may only reveal formal numbers without delving into the *informal* resolutions. It is the informal resolutions that could spell trouble and lead to much unnecessary consternation, including outside audits and legal challenges. If there is a district-wide discipline protocol, the district should not be fearful of holding administrators and staff accountable to the process. In the end, this kind of review may not be popular with some campuses for political reasons, but will definitely assist with accuracy when reviewing disciplinary numbers across the entire district.

As noted before, an internet search will yield a myriad of ideas and products on school safety. The above were selected to encourage discussion. Additionally, each of you as professionals in the field, in your very distinct districts undoubtedly have other ideas that are tried-and-true without the utilization of a police force, noted. However, if and when the time comes, what about the police force?

What is the goal of the police force?

The obvious answer to the question is, "to help keep schools safe." However, as noted earlier, the devil is in the details. What exactly is the benefit of a school police force when detractors have and will recount "school-to-prison pipeline" studies?

This past week the Huffington Post posted an article with the headline, "**School Police Have Uncertain Impact on Student Arrests, Crime Prevention.**" Citing studies from various sources, including the Journal of Pediatrics, the article reported that **almost one third of Americans are arrested before age 23. The number is up from about one fifth in 1965, the last time a similar study was conducted.**

Other notable highlights of the article included the above referenced declining statistics on juvenile crime. The author also listed several high-profile, anecdotal stories covered by national media regarding young students arrested for minor offenses, such as, “a 6-year-old Wisconsin boy arrested for ‘playing doctor’ with a 5-year-old girl; a 12-year-old arrested in Memphis for not wearing his helmet at a skateboard park; a 13-year-old boy arrested in New Mexico for burping in gym class (his parents' lawsuit also revealed the arrest of a 7-year-old girl who refused ‘to sit next to the stinky boy’ in class); a 10-year-old Connecticut boy arrested for giving a classmate a ‘wedgie,’ and; a 5-year-old who was bound at the wrists and ankles, arrested and charged with assault after kicking a police officer in the leg.” The article concludes there is little hard data to show school police are truly making a difference in schools. Moreover, policies and practices like school police and “zero-tolerance” are merely knee-jerk reactions to anomalous shooting from the 1990’s.

Of course there are those who believe properly trained school police forces are a value-added benefit to school districts. Media sensationalized cases aside, proponents like Dr. Ronald Stephens, executive director of the California-based National School Safety Committee, **believe the goal for any in-school police force is "to provide a safe environment and keep kids out of jail."** The key seems to be training and cooperation.

According to the National School Safety and Security Services website, armed school security, including school police officers, should base their protocols on a "Triad Model" consisting of law enforcement, student government, and law-related education. “To fully understand this aspect of school safety, SROs and school-law enforcement relationships must be viewed as the first-line of prevention, not as being punitive or prison-like.

Without hard data, what is the benefit of a school police force?

Of course the term “benefit” itself is subjective. Many will have opinions on the benefits on the matter but the following seems to be the most straight-forward. Simply put, **a school police force enables direct communication with law-enforcement and criminal case status.** In most misdemeanor cases of thefts or assaults, a report can be generated, reviewed by district personnel, and forwarded to the local courts quickly, keeping the school district “in-the-loop.” Of course this is a great benefit when some district resolutions to misconduct are contingent upon criminal resolution. The benefit is even more evident in more serious cases where resolutions can be more severe. Without a school district police force, and depending on the working relationship with the particular law enforcement entity, the district may be stuck waiting to hear from law enforcement on their decision to proceed with filing a case.

What of “peace of mind?”

Since schools seem to be only reflective of society, in general, we should not fail to mention the idea that an armed police force does offer some peace of mind. As we hear of truly heinous and violent crimes in society, let us never forget these crimes, although rare, have touched our schools. Sadly, there is little doubt they will happen again. The question here is, **since we see armed security personnel in banks protecting our financial resources, why then would anyone be offended or surprised to see armed police officers in our schools, protecting our most precious *human* resources? Following the same logic, just as armed security personnel in financial institutions have never fully stopped bank robbery; no one should deduce the presence of armed school police will fully stop any nefarious activity in schools.** But in those exceedingly rare and violent acts, wouldn’t on-site school police, who have regularly interacted with students, bring peace of mind to us, and more importantly, to our children; if not only *some*?

In the final analysis, there are many things to discuss and consider regarding the creation and maintenance of a school police department. I hope and pray, collectively, we are able to discuss the issue and never stop trying to improve school safety.

Michael Menchaca, Director, Office of Professional Standards, Ft. Worth Independent School District.

Editor's Note: Several of Michael's colleagues (school police officers/chiefs, security chiefs, directors, etc.) have also voiced concerns that should enter into this conversation. In districts without school police officers, the local police are often slow to respond to calls from the school. The school call for an officer to respond is simply added to the list of other pending assignments with schools generally having no higher priority than any other call for police services. Put bluntly, the school is just another customer to the local police.

With a school police force, however, the school is more than a customer – it is family, with the school being the **ONLY** priority for the school police officers. According to several principals I talked with, local police officers are also known to be less than responsive to the administrator's concerns than are the school police. Police officers in general are quick to point out that they are better at dealing with bad guys than with bad kids. "Well, he appears calm now," said one officer to a principal who called to have an out of control teen removed from the school. She told me, "If you can't send me a school police officer, don't send me one at all."

Finally, the school police leaders content that under the FERPA laws, school police officers have access to student records that other local police officers might not have.

I believe Michael's article will generate much discussion. Many districts will be making tough decisions in the near future and I hope the information in this newsletter will help.

Editor's Notes: Mark your calendar for **NASSLEO's 43rd Annual School Security Conference, July 8-11, 2012, at the Miami Marriott Biscayne Bay Hotel.** Final details will be forthcoming next month so watch for the Conference Program in your email box or on the website at: www.nassleo.org.

Thought of the Month: Why should you attend NASSLEO's 43rd Annual School Security Conference in the Magic City of Miami? Maybe Captain Chesley Sullenburger "Captain Sully," the hero of the miraculous airliner landing in the Hudson River can help: He said, "Every day I tried to make a small deposit of training or experience into my memory bank knowing that one day I would have to make an instant massive withdrawal." He was ready in his crisis of a lifetime. Are you? We can help. See you at the Conference.

Finally, I want to thank **Astro Optics, LLC** for sponsoring our Newsletters for the next six months. I look forward to working closely with this company which has a long history of providing effective school safety products. This will be a great partnership!

Peter Pochowski
Secretary and Editor

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