

SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS: OVERVIEW AND PRESENTATION OF STRATEGIES IN VIRGINIA

STUDY PLAN

Study Mandate

- The Virginia Commission on Youth solicited suggestions from members at the end of 2017 for study topics to add to the 2018 Commission on Youth work plan.
- Senator Dave Marsden suggested that the Commission on Youth learn more about the utilization of school resource officers (SROs) in schools in Virginia.
- The Commission on Youth will hear presentations on issues involving SROs in Virginia schools at its June 6, 2018, meeting. The following topics will be addressed:
 - *School Safety in Virginia: An Overview of Laws, Trainings, and Resources*
Donna P. Michaelis, Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services
 - *Keeping Kids in the Classroom and Out of the Courtroom: What Virginia's Data Tells Us*
Gerard Lawson, PhD, LPC, NCC, ACS, Virginia Tech
 - *Training and Support of Virginia's School Resource Officers and School Safety Officers*
Gerard Lawson, PhD, LPC, NCC, ACS, Virginia Tech

Background

School Resource Officers (SROs)

- “School resource officer” is defined in § 9.1-101 of the Code of Virginia as “a certified law-enforcement officer hired by the local law-enforcement agency to provide law-enforcement and security services to Virginia public elementary and secondary schools.” SROs are supervised by local law enforcement agencies and work in partnership with local schools. 93 percent of middle and high schools in Virginia have either a full- or part-time SRO.
- In 2013, the Office of the Governor published the Final Report of the Task Force on School and Campus Safety. This report generated a number of recommendations including the restoration of funding to the SRO Incentives Grant Fund.

School Security Officers (SSOs)

- School security officers are employed by local school boards and are primarily charged with maintaining order and discipline in schools. SSOs are not law enforcement officers.
- In 2017, the General Assembly passed and the Governor signed HB 1392, which allows schools to hire retired police officers as SSOs.

Select Committee on School Safety

- In March 2018, the Speaker of the House of Delegates appointed a Select Committee on School Safety to review comprehensively state and local policies relating to school security and protection. The Committee is made up of three subcommittees including a Prevention and Response Protocol Subcommittee.

Identified Issues

- Schools are required to report any student referrals to school resource officers to the Department of Education (DOE). However, the method of how schools report to local law enforcement is not specified. Using DOE data, a 2015 report by the Center for Public Integrity (CPI) found that Virginia ranked highest in the nation for student referrals to law enforcement, at 16 per 1000 students. The national average is 6 per 1000.
- CPI’s findings raised concerns about whether SROs in Virginia were contributing to the “pipeline to prison.” The pipeline to prison refers to the assertion by some advocates that the presence of SROs in schools increases the number of students who enter the justice system, in particular minority and disabled students.
- To investigate these concerns, two National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice grants-funded studies were undertaken by Virginia Tech (principal investigator Dr. Gerald Lawson).
- In its initial findings, Virginia Tech reported that there were problems and inaccuracies with the CPI report. They noted that the CPI report did not examine the number of student referrals that resulted in court involvement. When Virginia Tech examined referral outcome data, they found that only 2.3 per 1000 students in Virginia actually appeared before court intake officers. In addition, appearing before a court intake officer does not necessarily result in prosecution, as intake officers have the flexibility to dismiss a complaint or divert a student to non-judicial interventions such as counseling, mentoring, or mental health services.
- In its initial findings, Virginia Tech also reported that minority students and students with disabilities are being referred to law enforcement at a rate that is out of proportion to their demographic makeup in Virginia schools.

Study Activities

- Invite members of the Select Committee on School Safety to hear presentations by the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services and Virginia Tech on school resource officers.
- Following the meeting presentations, forward all information regarding school resource officers to the Select Committee on School Safety.
- Commission on Youth staff will monitor the Select Committee on School Safety and provide updates to Commission members as needed. The select committee and subcommittees are set to meet several times during 2018.