



Education

Advocates Prefer Ending School Officer Program To Studying It

by Lisa Backus

March 10, 2021, 5:00 am

Advocates for children are offering tepid support for a bill that would require the state Department of Education to study the role of School Resource Officers throughout Connecticut.

Several agencies including the **Center for Children's Advocacy** and the state Office of the Child Advocate told the Education Committee at a public hearing last week that studies have shown students are more likely to be arrested and less likely to feel safe when police are in the school building.

If the bill must move forward, the organizations said, it needs to include parents, students, disability advocates or civil rights advocates in the working group which would be studying SROs.

"Any discussion of the value of police in our schools should not and cannot occur without the input of those the police presence impacts the most – our students, and their families, as well as the advocacy organizations like ours that represent them," said Marisa Halm, director of the TeamChild Youth Justice Project for CCA.

State data gathered by Connecticut Voices for Children and UConn's Gun Violence Prevention Research Interest Project strongly suggests that "the negative impacts of police presence in schools – the disproportionate increase in arrests and discipline of children of color – outweigh any benefit," Halm said. **"What is more, there is a dearth of research establishing that SROs actually make our schools safer."**

The groups would prefer that local SRO programs, which usually pair officers with schools, end rather than the state conduct a study on whether the widely used initiatives should continue.

CCA believes that "a work group to study the role of SROs in schools is, in fact, unnecessary," Halm said. **"We believe existing data and research sufficiently establishes that students are better served when police remain in the community,"** she said.

But police contend that the longstanding practice of having SROs at schools maintains order and deters violence from outside threats. "School Resource Officers work closely with school counselors, psychologists, and social workers, who act as primary intervenor regarding behavioral issues and administrative sanctions," said Bryan Verillo, president of the Glastonbury Police Officers Association.

Verillo said ending the programs would create a risk to students and staff. He added, "Parents take comfort knowing, if necessary, a police officer is assigned to patrol the schools and can quickly respond to protect the life of their child."

The bill would require the working group overseen by SDE to develop recommendations on whether school resource officers should continue to be employed or assigned within the schools. The working group would be required to look at memorandums of understanding between schools and police on the role of SROs, the number and nature of instances of school discipline that involved SROs, whether the instances involved suspensions, expulsions or arrests and the degree of involvement the SROs have with the schools outside of disciplinary issues.

The bill would also require the working group to look at the cost and training of SROs as well as the grades they are assigned to deal with. It would also study whether the officers are employed by school districts or police departments.

The legislation also would require the state Department of Emergency Services and Public Protection to review security with schools and review whether classroom doors should have locks on the inside and outside.

DESPP Commissioner James Rovella said that his agency would need an additional two or three staff members to review security plans as described in the bill and that the federal Department of Homeland Security has already reviewed the issue of SROs and the issue of classroom doors.

Deputy Commissioner of Education Charlene Russell-Tucker agreed with the need to examine the role of SROs in the schools, but said the work would demand additional resources and personnel.

The problem with the bill according to state Child Advocate Sarah Eagan is that it not only leaves students, parents and advocates without a seat at the table, but also fails to recognize that schools need the resources to deal with behavioral issues without turning to the police.

"As children's needs go up and resources stay scarce, the implications for children's mental health are dire," Eagan said in her written testimony. "As the state moves through the COVID-19 pandemic, the support needs for children, families and educators is higher than ever. Resources cannot continue to be invested in a law enforcement response to children in crisis."

ctnewsjunkie.com/2021/03/10/advocates-prefer-ending-school-officer-program-to-studying-it/