

New federal guidance on school resource officers

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School safety is of great importance and an ongoing concern across the country. One way school districts have bolstered safety is through the use of school resource officers (SROs).

An SRO is a sworn law enforcement officer who is assigned to one or more schools on a daily basis. These officers interact with students and staff each day to create and maintain a safe, positive and effective learning environment.

According to the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), the goal of SRO programs is to provide safe learning environments and valuable resources to school staff; foster positive relationships with students; and develop strategies to resolve problems affecting students. The objective is to protect every child, so he or she can reach his or her fullest potential.

The federal government recently released guidance on SROs. Let's look at what it says and what it means for school districts.

On Sept. 8, 2016, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Office of Community Oriented Policing Services released letters about the use of SROs to states and schools. Read the USDOE letter at <http://links.ohioschoolboards.org/41503> . The letter from DOJ is at <http://links.ohioschoolboards.org/16999>

Both letters mention the positive impact SROs can have within a school and community where there is appropriate training, support and community engagement. The DOJ letter notes that SROs serve many positive purposes within a school beyond providing safety and security.

“Officers also fill critical roles as mentors and educators — teaching students about public safety and the criminal justice system, as well as how to keep themselves and their families safe,” the letter states. It goes on to say that officers also serve as role models for students, creating “lifelong positive impacts that changed the trajectory of their lives for the better.”

The USDOE letter also voiced concern about the “school-to-prison pipeline” and clarified that SROs should have no role in administering school discipline. The guidance advises schools to eliminate SRO-related school discipline practices that “may harm young people and needlessly contribute to their involvement with the juvenile and criminal justice systems.”

The letter encourages state and local leaders to set policy and pass legislation “designed to help SROs minimize citations and arrests of students and use diversion programs and other alternatives to arrest, detainment or the use of force.”

In conjunction with the letters, USDOE and DOJ released new resources: the Safe, School-based Enforcement through Collaboration, Understanding and Respect (SECURE) Rubrics. Its goal is to assist states and districts in improving SRO-related policy and practice. The resource also offers guidance to communities and law enforcement agencies interested in implementing effective SRO programs. Importantly, the SECURE Rubrics are “premised on the notion that partnerships between school districts, law enforcement agencies and juvenile justice entities should be formalized through a locally developed memoranda of understanding (MOU) among these parties.”

The SECURE Rubrics outline five common-sense action steps that can help ensure SROs are incorporated responsibly into school learning environment:

- Create sustainable partnerships and formalize MOUs among school districts, local law enforcement agencies, juvenile justice entities, and civil rights and community stakeholders.
- Ensure MOUs meet the constitutional and statutory civil rights requirements.
- Recruit and hire effective SROs and school personnel.
- Keep SROs and school personnel well trained.
- Continually evaluate SROs and school personnel, and recognize good performance.

The SECURE State and Local Policy Rubric <http://links.ohioschoolboards.org/61567> includes examples of laws, policies and MOUs from around the country, which can be used to help schools and communities establish thorough and meaningful school-police partnerships and programs.

The SECURE Local Implementation Rubric <http://links.ohioschoolboards.org/80048> provides two checklists that align with the five action steps listed above. The first checklist, *Checklist to Start*, is intended to assist school districts and law enforcement agencies interested in implementing a new school-police partnership or assess an existing program. The second checklist, *Checklist to Improve*, can be used to help improve existing school-police partnerships that include using SROs.

Regardless of whether your district has an existing SRO program or is considering a new one, these resources will serve as valuable tools to lead your discussions. A well-crafted MOU is critical to a successful SRO partnership and program and should clearly state the parties' roles, responsibilities and expectations. Given this document's importance, districts should consult with their legal counsel when revising or drafting MOUs.